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Jeremiah: Background and Contextual Issues

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Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475–1564). “Jeremiah,” one of seven Old Testament prophets depicted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

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Introduction

In our English translations, prophetic literature accounts for about 25% of the Old Testament. In the Hebrew arrangement, which includes some of the Historical Books and the prophetic works together, that percentage is closer to 33%.[1] While I do not have any objective data, in my experience, preachers often neglect or even avoid preaching from the prophets. The one exception tends to be during the Advent season, when preachers highlight select Messianic texts. Why are we so averse to preaching from the prophets?

We tend to avoid preaching from the prophets because they are so entrenched in history that they can be difficult for us to understand, much less preach. Fee and Stuart highlight this when they write, "Less than 2 percent of the Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the new-covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come in our time."[2] This means that over 90 percent of Old Testament prophecy focuses on the immediate or impending situations of Israel and Judah. So, unless we grasp the historical setting of the prophets, we will struggle to make logical sense of the prophetic texts of Scripture.

The prophets mention things like the calf of Beth-aven, the cows of Bashan, and the host of the heavens.[3] Regarding this seeming disconnect between the original audience and us, Chalmers states, "The prophet assumed that his audience possessed a certain body of knowledge that would allow them to grasp what he was trying to say.… Unfortunately for us, however, a span of more than 25 centuries separates the modern reader from the world of the prophets, and such assumed knowledge is no longer common."[4] Therefore, we must do a bit of work to help our people understand the historical world of the prophets so that they can clearly grasp their message.

My goal in this lecture is to offer a 30,000-foot overview of the crucial background, historical, and cultural issues related to the prophets generally and to the life and work of Jeremiah specifically. The Holy Spirit chose to keep for us the written record of the prophets and their discourses for a reason. As heralds of God's Word, we need to take them seriously and, when able, to preach and teach from them.

I hope that this information helps you to communicate the book of Jeremiah accurately. I pray that the Spirit of God will move in your lives and in the lives of your people as you seek to handle the Word of Truth faithfully.

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[1] The Hebrew arrangement includes the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets).

[2] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182.

[3] Hos. 10:5; Amos 4:1; Zeph. 1:4–6.

[4] Aaron Chalmers, *Interpreting the Prophets: Reading, Understanding, and Preaching from the Worlds of the Prophets* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 35.

Section 1: A 30,000–Foot Overview of the World of the Prophets

The Pentateuch and the Historical Books detail the overarching historical narrative of the Old Testament. Some modern readers do not realize that we must insert the prophets back into this narrative. That is to say, the story of Israel begins in Genesis 12 and continues through the book of Esther. We must interpret the prophets, from Moses to Malachi, within the historical context of these books. If the prophets are untethered from their historical setting, their message is obscured and, at times, almost impossible to discern.

A brief examination reveals that Old Testament history unfolds under the dominance of four successive empires in the ancient Near East.

- Egypt exists as a major Near Eastern power from the time of Abraham through the Exodus (c. 2000–1200 B.C.).[5]
- The Assyrians rise to dominance around 900 B.C. and rule until shortly after the Medo-Babylonians raze Nineveh in 612 B.C.[6]
- The Babylonians dominate from 626 B.C. until they are conquered by Cyrus the Great and the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 B.C.
- The Persian Empire, which extends from India to Egypt, is the last great empire of the Old Testament (539–331 B.C.).

The Egyptian Empire

The Greeks first divide Egyptian history into thirty dynasties. The first dynasty dates to the beginning of written history (c. 3000 B.C.), and the thirtieth ends with Alexander's conquest in 332 B.C. Scholars subdivide ancient Egyptian history into the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 B.C.; the 3rd–6th dynasties), the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000–1650 B.C.; the 11th–12th dynasties), and the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069 B.C.; 18th–20th dynasties).[7]

Abraham, born sometime between 2000 and 1850 B.C., emerges during the Middle Kingdom. Interestingly, the pyramids are quite ancient even at the time of Abraham's birth.[8] While the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) dominate the middle chapters of Genesis, chapter 37 shifts the narrative focus to Joseph. Why? The narrative surrounding Joseph explains why and how God's people settle in Egypt.

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[5] Egypt is powerful during the Middle Kingdom (2050–1700 B.C.) and becomes a superpower during the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.). During the Second Intermediate Period (1650–1550 B.C.), the kingdom is weak and ruled by the Hyksos.

[6] The final Assyrian king, Ashur-uballit II, unsuccessfully attempts to regroup at Harran until 609 B.C.

[7] Between these major periods, several intermediate periods exist (i.e., the First Intermediate Period: 7th–10th dynasties, the Second Intermediate Period: 13th–17th dynasties, and the Third Intermediate Period: 21st–25th dynasties).

[8] The pyramids are primarily built during the Old Kingdom period.

Joseph lives sometime around the end of the Middle Kingdom, or more precisely, during the Second Intermediate Period.[9] This is an unusual period in Egyptian history. For about 100 years, from 1650 to 1550 B.C., a Canaanite group known as the Hyksos rules Egypt. While scholars have debated Joseph's connection to the Hyksos since the time of Josephus, Joseph's story fits well into this setting.[10]

In this period, the Israelites enjoy relative freedom and prosperity; however, sometime around 1550 B.C., Ahmose I (c. 1550–1525 B.C.) drives the Hyksos out of Egypt.[11] Circumstances for the Israelites change drastically once Ahmose I takes the throne. The Israelites have, as Exodus puts it, "multiplied and grown exceedingly strong," so the Egyptians enslave the people of God and attempt to kill their male children.[12] In the midst of this uncertainty and oppression, God calls Moses to lead His people out of Egypt.[13]

This situation raises a significant issue in Old Testament studies: When does Moses live? Or, more precisely, when does the Exodus occur? The two most plausible dates are 1446 B.C. and 1275 B.C.

The biblical evidence for a fifteenth-century dating of the Exodus will be examined first. First Kings 6:1 states that 480 years elapse from the time of the Exodus to the building of the first Temple around 966 B.C. By simply adding 480 to 966, we arrive at 1446 B.C. Furthermore, Judges 11:26 states that 300 years elapse between the conquest and Jephthah's day (c. 1100 B.C.), which aligns with a 15th-century dating of the Exodus. Outside of Scripture, the Merneptah Stela may indirectly support an early dating for the Exodus.[14]

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[9] The Second Intermediate Period is a time of disunity between the Middle and New Kingdoms.

[10] J. A. Wilson, "Egypt," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, E–J, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 47.

[11] Ahmose I founds the Eighteenth Dynasty in Egypt. This period also begins the New Kingdom Period, which extends from 1550 to 1069 B.C.

[12] Exod. 1:7. Remember that centuries before, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be enslaved for 400 years (Gen. 15:12–16).

[13] Moses and Jeremiah (Jer. 43–46) are the biblical prophets most associated with Egypt. However, the following prophets also deliver oracles against Egypt: Ezekiel (29–32), Isaiah (19–20; 30–31), Hosea (7:11; 12:1), and Zechariah (14:18–19).

[14] According to Arnold and Beyer, the Stela "records the victory hymn of Pharaoh Merneptah in 1209 B.C. This inscription reports the pharaoh's victory over several peoples in Palestine, including 'the people of Israel' (*RANE* 160). Some would argue that the Israelites must have been in the land for a considerable length of time in order to be recognized by an Egyptian pharaoh. This would also support an early date." However, the same Stela is also used to support a later date. Arnold and Beyer continue, "Since the inscription designates Israel as a 'people' instead of a land or country, it may be assumed that Israel had only recently arrived in the area and not yet completely settled. Thus, the exodus and conquest were thirteenth-century B.C. events." Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 83–84.

Biblical evidence also supports a later, 13th-century date for the Exodus. The key text is Exodus 1:11, which connects the children of Israel to the building of the city of Ramesses by Pharaoh Ramesses II (1279–1213 B.C.). If the dates for Ramesses II are correct, then 1279 B.C. becomes the earliest possible date for the Exodus. If this date is used, the 480 years mentioned in 1 Kings 6:1 must be taken as ideal and figurative numbers.[15]

Uncertainty about the length of Israel's stay in Egypt further complicates the chronology. The answer seems straightforward according to Exodus 12:40–41 in the Masoretic Text, which states, "The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt." However, in Galatians 3:17, Paul says that the law (given at Sinai) is given 430 years after God's covenant with Abraham. Paul's chronology fits the LXX tradition's rendering of Exodus 12:40–41, which reads, "And the sojourning of the children of Israel, while they sojourned in the land of Egypt and the land of Chanaan, was four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass after the four hundred and thirty years, all the forces of the Lord came forth out of the land of Egypt by night."[16] Furthermore, the genealogies seem to indicate that Moses is the great-grandson of Levi, which suggests that only four generations of Israelites live in Egypt before the Exodus.[17]

As with the dating of the Exodus, two primary theories dominate discussions of the length of Israel's sojourn in Egypt: a longer and a shorter view. The longer view derives from the Masoretic text, which places the Israelites in Egypt for 430 years. The shorter view takes Paul, the LXX, and the genealogies to mean that the Israelites live in Canaan for about 215 years, then in Egypt for another 215 years.

These issues—the dating of the Exodus and the length of Israel's sojourn in Egypt—complicate any attempt at a foolproof dating of Moses and the events surrounding his life. Even so, uncertainty in dating does not call into question the historicity of these events. All things considered, Moses lives sometime in the New Kingdom Period of Egypt, between the 15th and 13th centuries B.C.

What is of utmost importance is Moses' message, especially as it relates to God's covenant with Israel. The Mosaic Covenant consists of three parts: 1. God will be their God, 2. The Israelites will be God's people, and 3. God will dwell in their midst. This covenant should transform every aspect of the Israelites' lives. This is why, after all that transpires in Numbers, the covenant is spelled out for the new generation of Israelites so that they can faithfully live with God in their

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[15] For example, the number could be the total of the twelve tribes of Israel multiplied by an ideal generation (i.e., 40 years). Likewise, the 300 years mentioned in Judg. 11:26 must also be seen as symbolic. Arnold and Beyer, 83–84.

[16] Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), Exod. 12:40–41.

[17] The genealogies include 1. Levi (Gen. 46:11), 2. Kohath (Gen. 46:11), 3. Amram (Exod. 6:18–20), and 4. Moses (Exod. 2:1–2; Num. 26:59).

midst.[18] As the rest of the Old Testament demonstrates, God's people are rarely faithful to Him and His covenant and spurn the God who dwells with them.[19]

Egypt loses much of its power and influence after the long, 66-year reign of Ramesses II in the 13th century. Economic strain, internal fragmentation, external pressures, and succession issues all weaken the once-great nation.[20] In this period, the Egyptian priesthood becomes much more powerful. In fact, the priests of Amon at Thebes become so powerful that they rival the pharaohs politically. Furthermore, Egypt becomes increasingly divided into the northern kingdom (Delta) and the southern kingdom (Thebes). For all of these reasons and more, Egypt diminishes as a powerful empire.

Though no longer a dominant empire after the New Kingdom ends (1069 B.C.), Egypt is still a regional power and something of a political wildcard. A crucial question, then, is why Egypt keeps showing up in the prophets long after it ceases to dominate the ancient Near East?[21]

The most straightforward answer is that Egypt remains a constant temptation for Israel and Judah. In the prophets, Egypt is no longer merely a historical nation but a theological symbol of misplaced trust. Egypt represents prestige,[22] power,[23] and protection.[24] Over and over again, the prophets maintain that Egypt represents human strength and spiritual bondage. This is why Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all focus their prophecies on Egypt even after the nation's decline. According to the prophets, Egypt's promises and power are hollow and empty. The people of God need to trust His Word and His sovereignty, not the mirage that is Egypt.

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[18] The book of Deuteronomy is a restating, or an exposition, of the Mosaic Covenant.

[19] Hays offers a helpful and concise summary of the importance of the Mosaic Covenant in Israelite history. J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), chap. 2.

[20] Ramesses II is a great builder, but his projects drain the economy. The Hittites and Sea Peoples are mighty enemies, while internal power struggles with the priesthood of Amon further weaken the nation. Moreover, Ramesses II's many children vie for control of the throne. For more details, see J. A. Wilson, "Egypt," 51–52.

[21] For example, the founder of Egypt's 22nd dynasty, Pharaoh Shishak, invades Judah during King Rehoboam's reign (1 Kgs. 14:25–26). Egypt also once again becomes important during the reign of Hezekiah and during Jeremiah's ministry.

[22] During the United Monarchy, an unnamed pharaoh gives his daughter to Solomon in marriage (1 Kgs. 3:1).

[23] During the Divided Monarchy, Shishak (925 B.C.) invades Judah during Rehoboam's reign (1 Kgs. 14:25–26; 2 Chr. 12:1–12). This proves that Egypt is still powerful and God's people are tempted to align themselves with their former overlords.

[24] Throughout the 8th–6th centuries, Judah looks to Egypt for protection and trusts in Egypt's promises to protect them against powerful foes like Assyria and Babylon. For example, Zedekiah allies with Egypt before Jerusalem's fall (Jer. 37).

After Egypt's supremacy begins to wane, Israel faces numerous regional threats. These include, but are not limited to, the Moabites, Canaanites, Ammonites, and the Philistines. However, none of these groups compare to the dominance of the next great world power, the Assyrians.

The Assyrian Empire

Assyria occupies much of modern-day Iraq.[25] As in Egyptian history, Assyrian history divides into three overarching periods: the Old Assyrian Period (2000–1700 B.C.), the Middle Assyrian Period (1365–911 B.C.), and the Neo-Assyrian Empire (912–609 B.C.).[26]

While the city of Ashur dates to the 3rd millennium B.C., the Old Assyrian Period begins with the construction of the temple of Ashur by King Erishum I (r. 1974–1935 B.C.). During this period, Assyria experiences tremendous financial stability due to its successful trade enterprises.[27] This trade, especially from merchant colonies around Kanesh, "provides the people of Ashur with the stability and security necessary for the expansion of the city and so laid the foundation for the rise of the empire."[28] The period ends around 1700 B.C., coinciding with Babylonian dominance under Hammurabi (1792–1750 B.C.).[29]

The Middle Assyrian Period begins with the Mitanni Empire, along with the Hittites, controlling much of the region.[30] Assyria once again rises under the leadership of Ashur-uballit I (1353–1318 B.C.), who breaks the Mitanni yoke from Assyria. The Middle Period includes several strong Assyrian kings such as Adad-Nirari I (1295–1263 B.C.),[31] Shalmaneser I (1263–1234

[25] Gen. 10:10–12 offers a brief explanation of Assyria's founding by Noah's great-grandson, Nimrod. The following prophets are associated with Assyria: Jonah (his entire book centers around his preaching to Nineveh), Amos (5:27; 6:14), Hosea (5:13; 7:11; 8:9–10; 9:3; 10:6), Isaiah (7:20, 30–31; 10:5–6; 36–37), Micah (1:6; 5:5–6), Nahum (his entire book is an oracle against Nineveh), and Zephaniah (2:13–15).

[26] Between 1700 B.C. and 1365 B.C., Assyria experiences a period often referred to as the Dark Age, which sees Assyria reduced to a shadow of its former power.

[27] One of the keys to Assyria's success is its dominance in the tin trade. Bronze (an alloy of tin and copper) is highly sought after. While copper is common, tin is much scarcer, leading Assyrian merchants to act as the "middlemen" of the Bronze Age.

[28] Joshua J. Mark, "Assyria," *World History Encyclopedia,* April 10, 2018, https://www.worldhistory.org/assyria/.

[29] Around this time, the prosperity of the Assyrian trade merchants also comes to an end.

[30] For information on the Mitanni Empire, see C. H. Gordon, "Mitanni," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, K–Q, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 406. For information on the Hittite Empire, see I. J. Gelb, "Hittites," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, E–J, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 612–614.

[31] Adad-Nirari I famously begins Assyrian deportation policies. While generally "deportees were carefully chosen for their abilities and sent to regions which could make the most of their talents…. The general populace became absorbed into the growing empire, and they were thought of as Assyrians." Mark, "Assyria." Yet deportation should not be seen as a minor inconvenience to life. Deportation means forced displacement, loss of identity, and isolation from the people and places that are crucial to a person's lived experiences. These policies significantly impact Israel in the 8th century.

B.C.), Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244–1208 B.C.), and the last great king of the Middle Period, Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 B.C.).

Overall, Assyria thrives during the Middle Period, decisively defeating the Mitanni Empire and assimilating its culture into its own. They also defeat the Hittites in 1245 B.C. at the Battle of Nihriya, marking the beginning of the Hittite civilization's decline. Assyria endures the Bronze Age Collapse (c. 1200 B.C.), along with civil wars, economic hardships, and numerous other challenges.[32] While Assyria is reduced in size and power by the end of the Middle Period, events soon change drastically, and, at least from the Assyrian perspective, the nation's greatest days lie ahead.

Assyria once again rises to dominance in the latter years of the 10th century and remains a major power until the final decade of the 7th century. Assyria's success during the New Empire, also called the Neo-Assyrian Empire, rests on two primary factors: military dominance and a unified theological vision.

First, Assyria's military prowess is unmatched. The Assyrians possess a highly trained standing army, which allows them to focus on empire expansion without the inconvenience of returning home to plant and harvest crops. They also employ advanced technology, including sophisticated siege warfare. Anglin states, "The pride of the Assyrian siege train is their engines. These are multistoried wooden towers with four wheels and a turret on top and one, or at times two, battering rams at the base."[33] Furthermore, they successfully utilize psychological warfare, such as mutilating the bodies of their enemies and impaling their captives on stakes, to terrorize their adversaries.[34]

Second, Assyrian religion becomes more unified under the worship of Ashur. In previous centuries, Assyrian religion mirrors the polytheism of other ancient Near Eastern civilizations. However, in this period, the worship of Ashur dominates Assyrian religion; Assyrians no longer regard Ashur as a local deity but elevate him to the supreme place of worship. According to Mark, "This unity of vision of a supreme deity helped to further unify the regions of the empire. The different gods of the conquered peoples, and their various religious practices, became absorbed into the worship of Ashur, who was recognized as the one true god who had been

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[32] Mark writes, "The precise cause of the Bronze Age Collapse has been debated by scholars for over a century, as well as the precise starting and ending date of the collapse, but no consensus has been reached. What is clearly known is that, between c. 1250–1150 B.C., major cities are destroyed, whole civilizations fall, diplomatic and trade relations are severed, writing systems vanish, and widespread devastation and death occur on a scale never experienced before." For more information, see Joshua J. Mark, "Bronze Age Collapse," *World History Encyclopedia,* September 20, 2019, https://www.worldhistory.org/Bronze_Age_Collapse/.

[33] Simon Anglin, *Fighting Techniques of the Ancient World 3000 BCE–500 CE: Equipment, Combat Skills and Tactics* (London: Amber Books, 2013), 186.

[34] For more general information about Assyria's military practices in this period, see Chalmers, 37. For more information about Assyria's use of psychological warfare, see Weijia Chen's "The Assyrian Empire: Terror Tactics as a Tool of Empire-building" (MA Thesis, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2020).

called different names by different people in the past but who now was clearly known and could be properly worshipped as the universal deity."[35]

Beyond these factors, strong leadership by numerous kings also drives Assyria's success during this period. The Neo-Assyrian Empire begins with the formidable leadership of Adad-Nirari II (r. 912–891 B.C.), who recaptures territories Assyria had lost and makes sound strategic decisions, such as his treaty with Babylon.[36]

Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.) and Shalmaneser III (r. 859–824 B.C.) further strengthen the empire during the 9th century. However, after Shalmaneser III's death, Assyria becomes embroiled in a brutal civil war, which halts the empire's progress and growth. After the war, King Shamshi-Adad V's wife, Shammuramat, becomes the queen regent because her son Adad-Nirari III (r. 811–783 B.C.) is too young to take the throne.[37] Her wise rule brings stability and growth to the empire, and in time, her son is able to continue the legacy she begins. However, Adad-Nirari III's successors do not capitalize on this success and, as a result, Assyria experiences a period of weakness during the first half of the 8th century. The nation and its leaders focus on the internal struggles and plagues that ravage its homeland, and its interest in Palestine fades, at least for a time.

In Israel, Jeroboam II (r. 786–746 B.C.) takes advantage of Assyria's weakness by expanding Israel's borders. Second Kings 14:25 explains, "He [Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher." Likewise in Judah, Uzziah (r. 767–740 B.C.) wisely uses this time to "rebuild the Red Sea port of Elath, defeat the Philistines, secure the Negeb, exact a tribute from the Ammonites, and fortify and arm Jerusalem (2 Chron. 26)."[38]

Unfortunately, this period of expansion does not lead to social and spiritual dedication among the people of God. Instead, social injustices, legal corruption, and spiritual hypocrisy and idolatry increase in the early 8th century.[39] God sends Amos and Hosea to preach to Israel and to warn

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[35] Mark, "Assyria."

[36] Adad-Nirari II conquers Babylon, but instead of sacking the city, he makes a peace treaty with the Babylonian king, most likely Nabu-shuma-ukin I (r. 900–887 B.C.). The kings marry each other's daughters, and the two nations remain loyal to each other for the next 80 years. For more information, see Mark, "Assyria."

[37] Interestingly, Shammuramat becomes a mythical figure named Semiramis, whom Greek and Roman writers honor as a goddess-queen. For example, in his *Histories*, Herodotus discusses some of Semiramis's exploits. Herodotus, *The Histories,* trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 229.

[38] Chalmers, 40. Note that Uzziah is co-regent with his father from approximately 792 B.C., which is why Scripture states that Uzziah reigns 52 years. 2 Kgs. 15:2.

[39] Hosea specifically mentions Baal worship in his book (Hos. 2:8; 13:1). The Samaria Ostraca consist of "over 100 inscribed potsherds (broken pieces of pottery) which are dated to the eighth century B.C. (probably during the reign of Jeroboam II) and were discovered in the capital of the northern kingdom. These short texts are receipts which record the delivery of wine or oil, with each containing at least one personal name. A significant number of these

them of the coming judgment.[40] At the same time, God uses Isaiah and Micah to prophesy to His people in Judah.[41] Remarkably, God even sends Jonah to preach to the Assyrians.

After Jeroboam II dies, Israel rapidly becomes unstable with five kings reigning over a twenty-three-year period.[42] To further complicate Israel's situation, Tiglath-pileser III (r. 745–727 B.C.) wrenches Assyria out of its slump. According to Mark, "Under Tiglath Pileser III's reign, the Assyrian army became the most effective military force in history up until that time and would provide a model for future armies in organization, tactics, training, and efficiency."[43]

Tiglath and his army begin making a series of incursions westward, including into Israel, from 743–738 B.C.[44] These first incursions are mentioned in 2 Kings 15:19–20,

> Pul the king of Assyria came against the land, and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that he might help him to confirm his hold on the royal power. Menahem exacted the money from Israel, that is, from all the wealthy men, fifty shekels of silver from every man, to give to the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria turned back and did not stay there in the land.[45]

The heavy tribute stays Tiglath's hand but does not stop Israel's eventual collapse.

Tiglath leads a second major campaign from 734–732 B.C., which results in the capture of Galilee and Gilead, and the first Israelite deportation.[46] The campaign centers on a significant conflict between Syria, Israel, and Judah known as the Syro-Ephraimite War. Around 735 B.C., King Pekah (Israel) enters an anti-Assyrian alliance with King Rezin (Syria), but King Ahaz

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names include a Baal element within them (e.g. Meriba'al, Abiba'al), suggesting that the worship of this god was quite common in the north." Chalmers, 42.

[40] Regarding Amos's ministry, from Amos 1:1 and from Amos 7:10–11, both Uzziah and Jeroboam II are ruling when Amos comes to Israel preaching (c. 760 B.C.). Note, Jonah also ministers during the eighth century.

[41] Isaiah's and Micah's books state that their ministries took place from around the time of Uzziah's death through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isa. 1:1 and Mic. 1:1). This means that both Isaiah and Micah have long ministries that extend at least until 701 B.C. Why 701 B.C.? Both prophets discuss Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah in 701 B.C. (Isa. 36–37 and Mic. 4:6–13).

[42] 2 Kgs. 15:8–30. Four of the five Kings who reign during the twenty-three-year period are assassinated.

[43] Mark, "Assyria."

[44] C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books*, updated edition (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 46.

[45] The ESV includes a footnote for 2 Kgs. 15:19 that states that Pul is "another name for Tiglath-pileser III (compare verse 29)."

[46] 2 Kgs. 15:29, "In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria." This text clarifies that Tiglath conquers cities east and west of the Jordan Rift. (Galilee proper = west of the Jordan and Gilead/Transjordan = east of the Jordan). All the locations the text mentions are Galilean, except for Gilead. Also note that the final deportations from Israel do not occur until 722 B.C.

(Judah) refuses to participate. Syria and Israel eventually march south and devastate parts of Judah, but are unable to capture Jerusalem.[47] Ahaz seeks Assyrian assistance to counter the threat.[48] Tiglath agrees to help, but "the cost to Judah for overturing Assyria for help was her independence, for after the Assyrians obliged Ahaz, Judah was virtually a puppet state in the Assyrian axis."[49]

After Tiglath-pileser III's death in 727 B.C., his son Shalmaneser V (r. 727–722 B.C.) takes control of Assyria. Almost immediately after taking the throne, Shalmaneser V leads his own campaign against Israel, which lasts from 725 B.C. until Israel's fall in 722 B.C.[50] Four of the eighth-century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah) prophesy Israel's collapse.[51] According to Assyrian records, 27,290 leading citizens of Israel are exiled, and the Assyrian administration resettles people from other regions into Israel to take their place.[52]

In late 722 B.C., Sargon II (r. 722–705 B.C.) takes the throne and, in response to an uprising by Ashdod, advances a campaign westward from 713–711 B.C.[53] Egypt encourages the Philistines and the Judeans, both vassals to Assyria, to revolt, promising military aid. Hezekiah, Judah's king, considers joining in the revolt, but Isaiah warns him not to participate.[54] Through Isaiah, God clearly tells Hezekiah not to trust in Egypt. Hezekiah obeys, and Judah escapes Assyria's destruction of Ashdod in 711 B.C.

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[47] According to 2 Chr. 28:8, "The men of Israel took captive 200,000 of their relatives, women, sons, and daughters. They also took much spoil from them and brought the spoil to Samaria." However, in Isa. 7:4–7, God speaks through Isaiah, telling His people "Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, 'Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,' thus says the Lord God: 'It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass.'"

[48] 2 Kgs. 16:7–8 reads, "So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, 'I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.' Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house and sent a present to the king of Assyria."

[49] Bullock, 46.

[50] Judah is now alone and survives as a small buffer state between Assyria and Egypt.

[51] "Probably more than any other event of this century, the fall of Samaria vindicated the prophets in the eyes of Israel. The reputation of the prophets was raised to a new plane of authority and respect. The memory of this event would henceforth turn listeners from an unheeding disposition to an uncanny discomfort when the prophets talked about judgment and disaster." Bullock, 46.

[52] Chalmers, 46–47.

[53] Sargon may have been Sennacherib's brother. A. L. Oppenheim, "Assyria and Babylonia," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, A–D, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 272. Also, remember that Ashdod is one of the five major cities of Philistia.

[54] In Isa. 20, Isaiah walks naked and barefoot for three years to demonstrate what will happen to Egypt: the Assyrians will humiliate them.

In 705 B.C., Sargon II dies, and his son Sennacherib (r. 705–681 B.C.) ascends the throne. At that time, many of the Western nations, including Babylon, rebel against Assyria at least in part because Egypt promises to aid them. This is the point where Hezekiah vacillates and sides with Egypt, the very thing God told him not to do. However, after Hezekiah receives the Rabshakeh's report that Sennacherib plans to destroy Judah, Hezekiah repents and prays for God to deliver His people.[55] God observes Hezekiah's repentance and hears his prayer. According to 2 Kings 19:35–36,

> And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword and escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.

Interestingly, Sennacherib tells a different story. According to "the Taylor Prism, a cuneiform block describing Sennacherib's military exploits which was discovered in 1830 CE by Britain's Colonel Taylor…the king claims to have captured 46 cities and trapped the people of Jerusalem inside the city until he overwhelmed them."[56]

Chalmers rightfully notes that whichever interpretation one follows, "It is clear that Judah was not fully incorporated into the Assyrian Empire at this stage, though it continued in vassalage and was reduced in size."[57] Judah endures for around 115 years after these events in 701 B.C.

Hezekiah continues to reign for 14 years, and overall, the biblical writers remember his reign positively.[58] According to 2 Kings 18:5, "He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him." His religious reforms are especially important to the spiritual health of Judah. He removes

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[55] 2 Kgs. 18:28–30 states, "Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah: 'Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! Thus says the king: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'" Then, according to 2 Kgs. 19:1–2, "As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz."

[56] Mark, "Assyria."

[57] Chalmers, 47.

[58] Hezekiah co-reigns with his son Manasseh for about a decade before his death in 687 B.C. The reason is that Scripture explicitly states that Manasseh reigns for 55 years. (2 Kgs. 21:1; 2 Chr. 33:1), which requires a co-regency with his father before his sole ascension to the throne. Furthermore, several Assyrian records indicate that Manasseh's reign parallels the kingships of Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 B.C.) and Ashurbanipal (r. 668–631 B.C.). So, Manasseh becomes co-regent when he is around 12 years old (2 Kgs. 21:1) and becomes the sole ruler of Judah upon his father's death.

the high places and even destroys Nehushtan, the bronze serpent from the desert that the people had begun to worship.[59]

After Hezekiah's death, his son Manasseh (r. 697–643 B.C.) becomes king and, by any spiritual metric, is as wicked as any king in Israel's or Judah's history. He rebuilds the shrines to Baal and even puts an idol of Asherah in the Temple.[60] Politically, he is a loyal subject of Assyria, and Esarhaddon's *Vassal Treaty Lists* even mention him as one of the rulers who supplies building material for a royal palace in Assyria.[61]

During Manasseh's reign, Assyria continues its dominance of the ancient Near East. Sennacherib reigns until 681 B.C., about six years after Hezekiah's death, when his sons assassinate him.[62] His assassination occurs for the following two reasons. First, Sennacherib sacks and destroys Babylon in 689 B.C. Throughout Mesopotamia, Babylon is seen as a sacred city, especially in relation to the god Marduk. Even the Assyrian people are outraged by his actions against Babylon. Second, Sennacherib triggers dynastic tensions by altering his succession plans. Originally, he appoints his son Adrammelech as crown prince, but later changes his mind and appoints Esarhaddon as his successor. According to 2 Kings 19:37, "Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword and escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son reigns in his place."

Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 B.C.) is a successful and important ruler in Assyrian history. One of his first tasks as king is to rebuild Babylon and try to smooth over Sennacherib's folly by attributing the destruction of Babylon to the will of the gods. He states, "Once during a previous ruler's reign there were bad omens. The city insulted its gods and was destroyed at their command. They chose me, Esarhaddon, to restore everything to its rightful place, to calm their anger, and soothe their rage."[63] After rebuilding Babylon, he goes on to conquer Egypt and greatly expand Assyria's borders.

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[59] 2 Kgs. 18:4, "He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan)."

[60] 2 Kgs. 21:7, "And the carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to Solomon his son, 'In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.'"

[61] "In the 1927–28 excavation season at the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh, archaeologist Reginald Campbell Thompson unearthed the discovery of a lifetime: the Esarhaddon Prism. The 33-centimeter-tall, six-sided clay prism dates to 673–672 B.C. It describes the history of King Esarhaddon's reign and an account of the reconstruction of the Assyrian palace in Babylon. Within the 493 lines of cuneiform inscribed on the sides of the prism, experts found the name of another king: 'Menasii šar [âlu]Iaudi,' or 'Manasseh, king of Judah.'" Warren Reinsch, "Esarhaddon Prism Proves King Manasseh," *Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology*, April 30, 2019, https://armstronginstitute.org/160-esarhaddon-prism-proves-king-manasseh.

[62] 2 Kgs. 19:37; Isa. 37:38.

[63] Mark, "Assyria." The original quote is part of *Esarhaddon's Building Inscription*, which is not a single text but a corpus of texts.

Esarhaddon wisely works to solidify a succession plan that will strengthen the next king's elevation to the throne.[64] In an unprecedented move, he decrees that after his death, Ashurbanipal will become king of Assyria and Shamash-shum-ukin will become king of Babylon.

Esarhaddon dies unexpectedly while on campaign in 669 B.C. His mother Naqia-Zakutu steps in to ensure Esarhaddon's wishes materialize. *The Loyalty Treaty of Naqia-Zakutu* calls for Assyrian and foreign rulers, including the Persians and the Medes, to accept Ashurbanipal as the rightful Assyrian king.[65]

Ashurbanipal (r. 668–631 B.C.) is the last great king of Assyria. Unlike many of his predecessors, he presents himself not merely as a warrior-king but as a learned scholar. In one inscription, he says of himself:

> I learned the craft of the sage Adapa, the secret (and) hidden lore of all of the scribal arts. I am able to recognize celestial and terrestrial omens (and) can discuss (them) in an assembly of scholars. I am capable of arguing with expert diviners about (the series) "If the liver is a mirror image of the heavens." I can resolve complex (mathematical) divisions (and) multiplications that do not have a(n easy) solution. I have read cunningly written text(s) in obscure Sumerian (and) Akkadian that are difficult to interpret. I have carefully examined inscriptions on stone from before the Deluge that are sealed, stopped up, (and) confused.[66]

He is responsible for the magnificent library of over 30,000 clay tablets that he housed in Nineveh.[67] He fills his library by sending out envoys "to every point in the lands under his control and had them retrieve or copy the books of that city or town, bringing all back to Nineveh for the royal library."[68]

After Ashurbanipal's 42-year reign, Assyria rapidly falls apart. A myriad of factors, such as weak successors, civil war, and formidable foes such as the Babylonians from the south and the Medes from the east, lead to the Assyrian Empire's complete collapse within two decades of Ashurbanipal's death. "In 612 B.C. Nineveh was sacked and burned by a coalition of Babylonians, Persians, Medes, and Scythians, among others…. The destruction of the great

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[64] Remember, Sennacherib's vacillation about his heir makes Esarhaddon's own ascension difficult. Esarhaddon likely seeks to ensure that his predecessor will not endure the same difficulties.

[65] Mark, "Assyria." *The Loyalty Treaty of Naqia-Zakutu* is successful in stabilizing Ashurbanipal's ascent to the throne but is not successful in the long term. Within a generation of Ashurbanipal's death in 631 B.C., Nineveh is destroyed (612 B.C.).

[66] Jamie R. Novotny and Joshua Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (668–631 BC), Aššur-etel-ilāni (630–627 BC) and Sîn-šarra-iškun (626–612 BC), Kings of Assyria, Part I*, Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 5/1 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2018), Ashurbanipal Assyrian Tablet 002.

[67] Cathleen Chopra-McGowan, "I Am Ashurbanipal at the British Museum," https://www.biblical archaeology.org/exhibits-events/i-am-ashurbanipal-at-the-british-museum/.

[68] Mark, "Assyria." Interestingly, because the "books" are actually clay tablets, thousands of them survived despite Nineveh being burned. The fire simply hardens them and ensures their survival.

Assyrian cities was so complete that, within two generations of the empire's fall, no one knew where the cities had been. The ruins of Nineveh were covered by the sands and lay buried for the next 2,000 years."[69] In fact, Nineveh's fall is so complete that "Alexander the Great did not notice the site in 331 B.C. It was A.D. 1842 before a trace of the city was discovered by Layard and Botta."[70]

While Assyria's collapse seems shocking to us, God knows it will happen and uses His prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, and Nahum to proclaim its destruction. Specifically, Zephaniah and Nahum clearly articulate the annihilation of Nineveh. Zephaniah explicitly prophesies Nineveh's collapse, proclaiming, "And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert."[71] Furthermore, Nahum's entire book proclaims Nineveh's destruction.[72]

What is happening in Judah during this period of Assyrian collapse? After Manasseh's death in 643 B.C., his wicked son Amon reigns two years before being assassinated by his own officials.[73] Immediately, another of Manasseh's sons, Josiah (r. 640–609 B.C.), becomes king of Judah. Josiah is altogether different from his brother Amon and his father Manasseh. Josiah, like his grandfather Hezekiah, seeks the Lord and enacts serious religious reforms. Yet not even Josiah's faithfulness can save Judah from destruction. Less than twenty-five years after Josiah's death, Judah falls to the dominant empire of the time, Babylon.

The Babylonian Empire

Babylon develops late, at least by Mesopotamian standards, since no clear written records of the city exist before 2300 B.C.[74] In the Old Babylonian Period (1900–1600 B.C.), Babylon is only a minor city, and remains such until Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 B.C.), the sixth Amorite king to rule the city, transforms "what had been an unstable collection of city-states into an empire that spanned the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia."[75] Before Hammurabi, "Mesopotamia was characterized by its diverse cultures and competing city-states, each with its own laws and

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[69] Mark, "Assyria."

[70] Kyle M. Yates, *Preaching from the Prophets* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1942), 158.

[71] Zeph. 2:13.

[72] Nah. 1:8–9; 3:1, 19.

[73] 2 Kgs. 21:23–24 reads, "And the servants of Amon conspired against him and put the king to death in his house. But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against King Amon, and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his place."

[74] "Babylon," *Britannica*, last modified May 26, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/place/Babylon-ancient-city-Mesopotamia-Asia.

[75] "Babylonian Empire," *New World Encyclopedia*, last modified May 1, 2023, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Babylonian_Empire.

customs. Hammurabi aimed to consolidate power and create a sense of order, leading to the dissemination of his laws throughout the empire via stelae placed in public spaces."[76]

Hammurabi's Code is much more than simply a judicial text. His *Code* extends beyond governmental laws and shapes the moral, ethical, and religious life of Mesopotamia. Hammurabi claims that the laws come from the god Marduk. In a real sense, Marduk's rise from a regional deity to the supreme deity of Babylon begins with Hammurabi. Eventually, Marduk becomes the chief deity in Babylon.[77]

Who was Marduk, and why does he take the place of preeminence in Babylonian worship? The editors of *Britannica* explain Marduk's origins and supremacy in this way,

> Originally, he seems to have been a god of thunderstorms. A poem, known as *Enuma Elish* and dating from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1119–1098 B.C.), relates Marduk's rise to such preeminence that he was the god of 50 names, each one that of a deity or of a divine attribute. After conquering the monster of primeval chaos, Tiamat, he became Lord of the Gods of Heaven and Earth. All nature, including humanity, owed its existence to him; the destiny of kingdoms and subjects was in his hands.[78]

Long after Hammurabi is gone, Marduk's position at the head of Babylonian religion remains.

After Hammurabi's death, Babylon quickly dwindles in strength and size. By 1595 B.C., Babylon is a shell of its former glory, and the Hittites easily sack the city. Around 1570 B.C., the Kassites take control and rename their realm Karanduniash.[79] Although they are outsiders, not unlike the Hyksos of Egyptian history, they remain in power for more than 400 years. [80] During this period, Babylon becomes an untouchable religious superpower in Mesopotamia. This is crucial to understanding biblical history. Even in periods when Babylon is not politically strong, it remains the religious epicenter of the ancient Near East. Babylon becomes the guardian of religious tradition and is revered even by other nations.[81] Babylon is "the *holy* city of western Asia, where the priests were all-powerful, and the only place where the right to inheritance of the

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[76] "Hammurabi's Code: A Reflection of Babylonian Religious Beliefs," *Babylonian Mythology Worldwide*, December 25, 2024, https://babylonian.mythologyworldwide.com/hammurabis-code-a-reflection-of-babylonian-religious-beliefs/.

[77] Mesopotamian religion is complex. For an overview, see "Mesopotamian Mythology," *Britannica*, last modified January 13, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mesopotamian-mythology.

[78] "Marduk," *Britannica*, last modified July 12, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marduk.

[79] Joshua J. Mark, "Babylon," *World History Encyclopedia*, October 14, 2022, https://www.worldhistory.org/babylon/. The Middle Babylonian Period (1595–1155 B.C.) is often referred to as the Kassite Period.

[80] "Babylonian Empire," *New World Encyclopedia*.

[81] Remember, this is why Sennacherib's sacking of Babylon is seen as such a horrendous act.

old Babylonian empire could be conferred."[82] Babylon's lasting influence is theological rather than military. Political powers shift repeatedly, but Babylon retains its role as the custodian of Mesopotamia's religious tradition.

In 1158 B.C., Babylon is sacked by its ancient foes, the Elamites.[83] The Elamites do not take lasting control over Babylon; instead, the dynasty inaugurated by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar I (r. 1124–1103 B.C.) remains influential for a century before Assyrian dominance. "For several centuries following Nebuchadrezzar I's rule, a three-way struggle developed among the Assyrians and Aramean and Chaldean tribesmen for control of Babylonia."[84]

From the 9th to the late 7th centuries, Babylon is almost continuously under Assyrian control, even though local Babylonian kings sit on the throne.[85] Babylon remains politically weak but religiously and culturally strong. At times, Babylon submits to Assyrian rule; at other times, it rebels. One of these rebellions eventually spurred Sennacherib to sack the city.

The last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (r. 668–631 B.C.), appoints Kandalanu king of Babylon around 648 B.C.[86] When Kandalanu dies around 627 B.C., a Chaldean usurper named Nabopolassar (r. 626–605 B.C.) assumes the throne. He "made Babylon his capital and instituted the last and greatest period of Babylonian supremacy."[87] His reign marks the beginning of the short-lived but important Neo-Babylonian Empire (626–539 B.C.).[88]

Nabopolassar masterfully leads Babylon into actual independence from its former Assyrian overlords. Babylon is no longer a puppet of Assyria and, under Nabopolassar, becomes a defining factor in Assyria's subsequent collapse. Around 616 B.C., Nabopolassar allies with the

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[82] "Babylonian Empire," *New World Encyclopedia*. For clarity's sake, "all-powerful" here does not mean unchecked political authority; rather, the term refers to priests' power to confer religious legitimacy.

[83] Elam neighbors Mesopotamia to the east and is a constant threat to Babylon. Their capital, Susa, is where J. De Morgan discovers the stela of Hammurabi's Code.

[84] "Babylonia," *Britannica*, last modified January 5, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/place/Babylonia.

[85] Sometimes Assyrian kings rule Babylon themselves. Tiglath-pileser III and Shalmaneser V are examples.

[86] Remember, Esarhaddon split his kingdom between Ashurbanipal (Assyria) and Shamash-shum-ukin (Babylon). Around 656 B.C., Shamash-shum-ukin revolts but is eventually defeated four years later. At that time, Ashurbanipal installs Kandalanu as the Babylonian King.

[87] "Babylonia," *Britannica.*

[88] Several biblical prophets minister during this period. These include Zephaniah (during the reign of Josiah), Habakkuk (likely before 605 B.C.), Jeremiah (who is called in 627 B.C. and lives through the exile of 586 B.C.), Ezekiel (who is exiled with around 10,000 other Judeans in 598 B.C.), and Daniel (who is exiled earlier than Ezekiel in 605 B.C.).

Median leader Cyaxares, and together they destroy Assur (614 B.C.), sack Nineveh (612 B.C.), and thwart Ashur-uballit II's attempt to rally the remnants of the Assyrian military (609 B.C.).[89]

At this time, Necho II begins ruling Egypt (r. 610–595 B.C.). He quickly steps in and aids Assyria in its last-ditch effort to survive because he wants to prevent Babylon from becoming the next political superpower. King Josiah of Judah, who is allied with the Babylonians, attempts to halt Necho II at the Battle of Megiddo (609 B.C.). However, Josiah is slain during the battle, and Judah ultimately falls.[90]

Soon after Josiah's untimely death, "The people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Josiah, and anointed him, and made him king in his father's place."[91] Jehoahaz (birth name: Shallum) appears to have been Josiah's choice because he is not the logical successor, being the fourth son rather than the firstborn.[92] However, Jehoahaz reigns for only three months in Judah before Necho II installs Jehoahaz's older brother, Eliakim, whose name he changes to Jehoiakim (r. 609–598 B.C.) as king of Judah.[93]

Judah is now firmly under Egyptian control. Necho II imposes a heavy tribute on Judah and controls the nation through Jehoiakim.[94] According to Wood and McLaren, "Jehoiakim was one of the most wicked men ever to sit on Judah's throne. He exploited the people unmercifully for his personal gain. In addition, he led the people to reestablish the pagan religious practices of Manasseh's day."[95] At this point, the prophet Jeremiah is thrust into the limelight.[96]

Early during Jehoiakim's reign, Jeremiah stands in the court of the Temple and prophesies the "destruction of the sanctuary if Judah did not repent."[97] Although numerous priests and prophets seek Jeremiah's death, he is spared when officials and elders intervene.[98] Shortly after the

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[89] "Nabopolassar," *Ancient Mesopotamia*, n.d., https://ancientmesopotamia.org/people/nabopolassar.

[90] "Necho II," *Britannica*, last modified March 28, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Necho-II.

[91] 2 Kgs. 23:30.

[92] The genealogical list in 1 Chr. 3:15 suggests that Jehoahaz is Josiah's fourth-born son.

[93] Jehoahaz is deported in chains and eventually dies in Egypt. 2 Kgs. 23:31–35.

[94] 2 Kgs. 23:35.

[95] Fred M. Wood and Ross McLaren, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 5–6.

[96] Jeremiah becomes a prophet around 627 B.C., but according to Bullock, "Jehoiakim's reign raised this prophet's profile to a new level of visibility. Jeremiah was no friend of Jehoiakim, and it was a mutual adversarial relationship, for Jehoiakim was certainly no friend of Jeremiah's." Bullock, 196. Biblically, Jeremiah's calling is detailed in Jer. 1:1–3, which states that his call occurs in the 13th year of Josiah's reign (627 B.C.).

[97] Bullock, 236. For the biblical account, see Jer. 7 and 26.

[98] Jer. 26.

Temple sermon, Jehoiakim has the prophet Uriah, son of Shemaiah, executed because his prophecies are "words like those of Jeremiah."[99]

According to Bullock, from around 609–605 B.C., "The Egyptians enjoyed a brief interregnum in which they flexed their military muscles in Syria-Palestine."[100] However, Babylon is also gaining power in this period. Nabopolassar's son, the crown prince Nebuchadnezzar II, is now the commander-in-chief of Babylon's army. He "played a crucial role in consolidating and expanding his father's empire, leading military campaigns against neighboring kingdoms and securing Babylon's position as a regional power."[101]

In 605 B.C., Egypt allies with the remnants of Assyria and attempts to hold the Euphrates at Carchemish against Nebuchadnezzar's advancing Babylonians; however, the Babylonians soundly defeat the Egyptian-Assyrian coalition. According to Chalmers, now Babylon is the "unrivaled superpower of the ancient Near East."[102]

Later in the same year, Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605–561 B.C.), now Babylon's king, turns his attention to Judah, which immediately becomes a Babylonian vassal. As a result, Babylon exacts an annual tribute from Judah, removes certain sacred vessels, and deports select Judean nobles, including Daniel and his friends.[103] This deportation is not the full exile; it signifies only the beginning of God's judgment against Judah.[104]

Jehoiakim remains loyal to Nebuchadnezzar for three years before switching his allegiance back to Egypt. Despite Jeremiah's clear prophecy that Babylonian dominance is from God and cannot be prevented, Jehoiakim refuses to listen.[105] Of course, this begs the question, why does Judah's king rebel against the world superpower of his day? In 601 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar attempts to invade Egypt but is unsuccessful. Jehoiakim reverts to Egypt because he mistakenly concludes that Egypt will once again attain supremacy.[106]

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[99] Jer. 23:20–23.

[100] Bullock, 236–7.

[101] "Nebuchadnezzar II," *Ancient Mesopotamia*, n.d., https://ancientmesopotamia.org/people/nebuchadnezzar-II.

[102] Chalmers, 52. Jeremiah discusses the battle in Jer. 46:2.

[103] 2 Kgs. 24:1; Dan. 1:1–14.

[104] Note that 605 B.C. is the same year in which God tells Jeremiah to write his prophecies on a scroll and deliver them to the king (Jer. 36). Jeremiah obeys, but Jehoiakim has the scroll destroyed, whereby Jeremiah writes another, expanded version of his prophecies.

[105] Jer. 25.

[106] Chalmers, 52.

Between 601 B.C. and 598 B.C., Judah is pressured by "bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites."[107] Bullock speculates that although Nebuchadnezzar did not at first launch a campaign against Judah, "The Syrian, Moabite, and Ammonite marauders into Judean territory may have been incited by the Chaldeans."[108]

In late 598 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar abandons pressure tactics and besieges Jerusalem in order "to punish Jehoiakim for withholding tribute."[109] Around this time, but before the Babylonian siege, Jehoiakim dies, and his son Jehoiachin (r. 598–597 B.C.) becomes king.[110] According to 2 Kings 24:8, "Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem." Quickly, Jehoiachin "gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother and his servants and his officials and his palace officials. The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign."[111] Chalmers explains, "Like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians adopted a policy of forced deportation, exiling the king along with a significant number of leading citizens of the nation (the author of 2 Kings puts the figure at 10,000, 24:14), one of whom was Ezekiel."[112]

After his deportation, Jehoiachin remains in Babylon for nearly forty years before being released from prison, though he never returns to Judah.[113] In his place, Nebuchadnezzar appoints Zedekiah (r. 597–586 B.C.) as the next puppet king of Judah.[114] Early in his reign, "In 594/3 ambassadors from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon met in Jerusalem to discuss the prospects of rebellion against Babylon (27:3). The occasion was appropriate for Jeremiah to dispatch his message to the sponsoring kings, advising submission to Nebuchadnezzar."[115]

Zedekiah does not immediately rebel against Babylon, nor does he receive God's Word through Jeremiah regarding Babylon. The biblical text is clear on this point: "He did not humble himself

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[107] 2 Kgs. 24:2 states, "And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets."

[108] Bullock, 106.

[109] Wood and McLaren, 6.

[110] This timeframe derives from 2 Kgs. 24:1–11, which reports Jehoiakim's death before the siege is mentioned. That said, some scholars, such as Bullock, reconstruct the timeline as follows: "The Babylonians besieged Jerusalem in 598 B.C., and before the outcomes of the three-month siege could be determined, Jehoiakim died." Bullock, 237. In any case, Jehoiakim dies before the exile of 597 B.C. begins.

[111] 2 Kgs. 24:12.

[112] Chalmers, 52. See Ez. 1:1–2 for the biblical account of Ezekiel's deportation.

[113] "Jehoiachin," *Britannica*, last modified April 3, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jehoiachin.

[114] Zedekiah, the throne name given to Mattaniah, is the third son of Josiah.

[115] Bullock, 237. At this time, God tells Jeremiah to wear a yoke around his neck (Jer. 27).

before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the Lord."[116] Unsurprisingly, Zedekiah "failed to learn from the examples of his predecessors and decided to rebel."[117]

Nine years into his reign in 588 B.C., Zedekiah "rebelled against the king of Babylon."[118] Zedekiah breaks the vow he had made in the Lord's name,[119] and seeks to ally with Egypt.[120] In response, Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem, and for nearly two years the city remains under relentless assault. During this period, Zedekiah attempts to limit Jeremiah's influence by having him arrested. Zedekiah does not want the prophet's message that Judah should surrender to Babylon to influence the nation.[121] On the ninth day of the fourth month in 586 B.C., the Babylonian army breaches the walls of Jerusalem.[122] Within a month, Babylon gains total control of the city.[123]

Zedekiah attempts to flee when the breach occurs but is soon captured. His sons are killed in front of him, his eyes are gouged out, and he is taken to Babylon.[124] In his place, Nebuchadnezzar appoints Gedaliah as governor.[125] Gedaliah is not of royal lineage, but interestingly, his father Ahikam is distinctly named as one of the men who intervened to save Jeremiah's life during Jehoiakim's reign.[126] Gedaliah rules from Mizpah, likely because the devastation of Jerusalem made it impractical to govern from the city.[127] However, only a few months later, "Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishama, of the royal family, came with ten

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[116] 2 Chr. 36:12.

[117] Chalmers, 52.

[118] 2 Kgs. 24:20.

[119] 2 Chr. 36:13; Ezek. 17:16–19.

[120] Ezek. 17:15. Once again, Egypt is a temptation for God's people. Judah foolishly looks to Egypt, instead of to the Lord, as their savior. Ultimately, Egypt does not follow through. Jer. 37:5 states, "The army of Pharaoh had come out of Egypt. And when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard news about them, they withdrew from Jerusalem."

[121] Jer. 37:4. Chronologically, the events of Jer. 21, 32–34, and 37–38 occur during the siege. For more information, see Bullock, 238.

[122] 2 Kgs. 25:3–4.

[123] 2 Kgs. 25:8.

[124] 2 Kgs. 25:6–7.

[125] According to Jer. 39:11–14, Nebuchadnezzar deals kindly with Jeremiah and places him under Gedaliah's care.

[126] Jer. 26:24.

[127] 2 Kgs. 25:23.

men and struck down Gedaliah and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah."[128]

According to Bullock,

> The final stage of Judean statehood is bound inextricably to the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. He would have remained in the land after Jerusalem fell, but Johanan refused Jeremiah's word from the Lord that they should not flee to Egypt, and he took Jeremiah and Baruch along with them in defiance of that word.[129]

All hope is not completely lost for God's people. In 561 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar's son (Evil-merodach) releases Jehoiachin from captivity, but does not allow him to return to Judah. Nevertheless, "The books of Kings end on the hopeful assertion that a son of David was alive and well. Whatever the human motivation behind Jehoiachin's release, God's decree was that the family of David, though severely chastened, would not be exterminated (Matt. 1:1–6). Although humans break their covenant, God keeps his promises."[130]

A few decades later, God's people will once again be free to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, and serve the Lord. Much transpires between 561 B.C. and 538 B.C.; Babylon is no longer the dominant political superpower, and the last great political power of the Old Testament, the Persians, replaces it. If Babylon represents the instrument of divine judgment, Persia emerges as the agent through whom restoration begins.

The Persian Empire

Persia originates in southwestern Iran, but its empire eventually encompasses the Iranian plateau and beyond. Scholars divide Iranian history into the following periods: 1. The Prehistoric Period (ends c. 1000 B.C.), 2. The Protohistoric Period (c. 1000–500 B.C.), and 3. The Period of the Achaemenid Dynasty (6th–4th century B.C.).[131]

Biblically, the most pressing historical information comes from the Achaemenid period. Nevertheless, developments in these early eras, particularly the relationship between the Medes and the Persians, cannot be properly understood without some awareness of the peoples and processes that shaped these past epochs.

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[128] 2 Kgs. 25:25. For a detailed account of the destruction of Jerusalem, including the burning of the Temple and deportation numbers, see Jer. 52.

[129] Bullock, 238. For context, Johanan supports Gedaliah and even warns him of Ishmael's betrayal. After Gedaliah is assassinated, Johanan tries to avenge Gedaliah's death, but Ishmael escapes. At this point, Jeremiah tells Johanan that they should remain in Judah, but he refuses to listen and forcibly takes Jeremiah and others to Egypt. Jer. 42–43:7.

[130] Arnold and Beyer, 222–23.

[131] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*, last modified November 8, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Iran.

Persian history is inextricably linked to the Elamites. According to Mark, the Elamites "most likely were the indigenous people" of southwestern Iran.[132] However, long before the rise of Persia, Elam develops as a distinct civilization centered at Susa.[133] By contrast, the Persians belong to a later wave of Indo-Iranian tribal groups that migrate into the Iranian plateau, becoming established by the first millennium B.C.[134] These Indo-Iranian peoples include groups later known as the Medes, Persians, Parthians, Bactrians, and others.[135]

During the Iron Age, these Indo-Iranian tribes begin to dominate the plateau.[136] By around the middle of the 9th century, two of these groups, the Medes and Persians, begin to appear in cuneiform sources. The sources describe two people groups, but neither constitutes a unified kingdom at this point. They are tribal groups with no singular ruler or defined territorial boundaries.[137]

The Median Kingdom, according to Greek historian Herodotus, dates to the reign of Deioces (728–675 B.C.), whom Herodotus posits founds the Median capital of Ecbatana (modern Hamadan). However, "To judge from the Assyrian sources, no Median kingdom such as Herodotus describes for the reign of Deioces existed in the early 7th century B.C.; at best, he is reporting a Median legend of the founding of their kingdom."[138]

Unlike Deioces, the Median King Cyaxares (r. 625–585 B.C.) is a well-attested historical figure. He unifies and organizes the Median forces and sets his sights on the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. His army surrounds Nineveh in 614 B.C. but is unable to capture it. They are, however, able to successfully sack Ashur, the religious capital of Assyria. At this point, an important alliance occurs between Cyaxares and the Babylonian King Nabopolassar. Together, the Medes and the Babylonians raze Nineveh and bring about the collapse of the once-great Assyrian Empire. Cyaxares continues to grow his kingdom to the point that, "at his death Cyaxares

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[132] Joshua J. Mark, "Ancient Persia," *World History Encyclopedia*, November 12, 2019, https://www.worldhistory.org/Persia/.

[133] "These ancient people can be dated to the prehistoric period, and their capital, Susa, is founded by 4395 BCE, making it among the oldest in the world. To be clear, 'Susa was founded before even the Proto-Elamite Period (c. 3200–2700 BCE), though it was contemporaneous with Elamite culture.'" Mark, "Persia."

[134] Note that older sources often refer to these tribal peoples as Aryan. However, that language is no longer helpful and can be misleading without proper context.

[135] Mark, "Persia."

[136] The Iron Age is comprised of Iron Age I (1300–1000 B.C.), Iron Age II (1000–800/750 B.C.), and Iron Age III (750–550 B.C.).

[137] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[138] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

controlled vast territories: all of Anatolia to the Halys; the whole of western Iran eastward, perhaps as far as the area of modern Tehran; and all of southwestern Iran, including Fars."[139]

After Cyaxares dies, his son Astyages (r. 585–550 B.C.) ascends the Median throne. Compared to his father, little is known of Astyages's reign, except that his entire kingdom is soon overthrown by one of the greatest kings of antiquity, Cyrus II (r. 590–528 B.C.) of Persia.

Persian history before the early seventh century is only visible at the level of tribal groups. The Achaemenid Dynasty emerges historically with Achaemenes, its eponymous founder. However, as with Median history, the line between truth and fiction is obscured. No primary-source records actually exist for Achaemenes. According to genealogical tradition preserved in the later Behistun Inscription, three kings rule between Achaemenes and Cyrus II: Teispes, Cyrus I, and Cambyses I.[140]

Teispes is said to have divided the Persian Kingdom between his two sons, Cyrus I (r. 640–600 B.C.) and Ariaramnes (r. 640–600 B.C.). The historical data remains slim until the reign of Cyrus I's son, Cambyses I (r. 600–559 B.C.), who is attested by Herodotus and Persian royal genealogy.[141] According to *Britannica*, "When Median control over the Persians was supposedly reasserted under Cyaxares, Cambyses I is thought to have been given a reunited Persia to administer as a Median vassal."[142] Later, according to Greek tradition, the Median King Astyages gives his daughter Mandane in marriage to Cambyses. Herodotus writes, "He [Astyages] gave her [Mandane] to a Persian named Cambyses, whom he found to be of a good descent and of a quiet disposition, counting him to be in station much below a Mede of middle rank."[143] Their son, Cyrus II, becomes the next ruler of Persia, inheriting a position within the Median confederation that he later transforms into an empire.[144]

Early in his reign, Cyrus II initiates diplomatic exchanges with the Babylonian King Nabonidus (556–539 B.C.). According to Bullock, "Hoping against hope to contravene the Median power,

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[139] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[140] The inscription is dated to the reign of Darius I (r. 522–486 B.C.). A caveat is that the inscription is best understood as Persian royal tradition, not objective history. For more information, see Joshua J. Mark, "Behistun Inscription," *World History Encyclopedia*, November 28, 2019, https://www.worldhistory.org/Behistun_Inscription/.

[141] Herodotus 1.107–1.113.

[142] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[143] Herodotus 1.107–1.113. Scholarship is divided, with some asserting that Cyrus II actually marries Mandane rather than that she was his mother.

[144] According to *Britannica*, a legend exists which says that "Astyages, having had a dream that the baby would grow up to overthrow him, ordered Cyrus slain. His chief adviser, however, instead gave the baby to a shepherd to raise. When he was 10 years old, Cyrus, because of his outstanding qualities, was discovered by Astyages, who, in spite of the dream, was persuaded to allow the boy to live. Cyrus, when he reached manhood in Persis, revolted against his maternal grandfather and overlord. Astyages marched against the rebel, but his army deserted him and surrendered to Cyrus in 550 B.C." "Cyrus the Great: King of Persia," *Britannica*, last modified December 5, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cyrus-the-Great.

the Babylonian King… endorsed Cyrus and his exploits against Media, and by 550 Cyrus had unseated Astyages and gained control of the Median empire."[145] Cyrus's overthrow of the Median Empire thrusts Persia onto "the international scene with a suddenness that must have frightened many."[146]

Cyrus II goes on to further expand his empire on numerous fronts, but none more significant than his conquest of Babylon. Somewhat surprisingly, Babylon's defeat is anticlimactic. "Cyrus marched into town in the late summer of 539 B.C., seized the hands of the statue of the city god Marduk as a signal of his willingness to rule as a Babylonian and not as a foreign conqueror, and was hailed by many as the legitimate successor to the throne."[147]

Only a year later, in 538 B.C., Cyrus issues a decree that allows the exiled Judeans the right to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple.[148] An important question is, why does Cyrus make such a generous offer to the Jewish people? Jacobson and Chan explain:

> The Persian religion was Zoroastrianism, but the empire tolerated and even encouraged local populations to keep their own gods, temples, and religious traditions. When Persia conquered Babylon, many captive peoples, including the exiled Judeans, were allowed to return home and reestablish their religious institutions. With respect to local government, Persia granted considerable local autonomy, but the land was divided into provinces of the Persian Empire with appointed governors. Judah became the province Yehud, no longer an independent nation or vassal kingdom with its own dynastic kings.[149]

So, Cyrus is not acting unusually kind to the exiled Judeans; he is simply enacting his imperial ideology. In fact, he explicitly demonstrates this ideology in the *Cyrus Cylinder*, which states,

> The gods, who resided in them, I brought back to their places and caused them to dwell in a residence for all time. I caused them to take up their dwelling in residences that gladdened the heart. May all the gods, whom I brought into their cities, pray daily before

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[145] Bullock, 333. Historians typically consider 550 B.C. the official start of the Achaemenid Empire.

[146] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[147] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[148] Ezra 1. Biblically, the decree marks the beginning of the Postexilic Period. The prophets of this period include Haggai (c. 520 B.C.), Zechariah (c. 520 B.C.), and Malachi (460–430 B.C.). Importantly, Daniel is a transitional prophet between the Babylonian and Persian Empires, as he lives and serves during both.

[149] Rolf A. Jacobson and Michael J. Chan, *Introducing the Old Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 12. Note that Jacobson's and Chan's statement that "The Persian religion was Zoroastrianism" is an oversimplification, as scholars debate the influence of Zoroastrianism in this period. In any case, Zoroastrianism is considerably different from Judaism and Christianity as it is henotheistic and dualistic in nature, with the supreme god Ahura Mazda constantly engaged in a cosmic struggle with evil.

> Bêl and Nabû for long life for me, and may they speak a gracious word for me and say to Marduk, my lord.[150]

Cyrus's policy starkly contrasts with those of the Assyrians and Babylonians. He does not rule by deportation but by restoration. Allowing refugees to return to their homelands is part of his strategy to gain loyal subjects throughout his kingdom. According to Mark, "All Cyrus II asked was that citizens of his empire live peacefully with each other, serve in his armies, and pay their taxes."[151]

While Cyrus's policy is restoration, Isaiah clarifies that God is using Cyrus for divine purposes. In Isaiah 44:28, the Lord "says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'"[152] That said, Isaiah in no way asserts that Cyrus is a loyal servant of the Lord. In fact, he records the Lord's words to Cyrus, "For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me."[153]

God's sovereignty works so that later in the same year, 538 B.C., fifty thousand Jews, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, choose to return to Judah.[154] Zerubbabel is more than a political leader; he embodies Messianic hope for the people because he is in David's lineage.[155] The returnees quickly begin rebuilding the Temple.[156] However, the Jews face financial hardships and

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[150] *Cyrus Cylinder,* lines 32–35, trans. Robert William Rogers, in *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1912), 381. According to Nathan Steinmeyer, "The Cyrus Cylinder is one of the best-known surviving texts from the Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550–332 BCE), due almost entirely to its proposed connection to the return of the Judean exiles and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple as recorded in the Book of Ezra." See Nathan Steinmeyer, "The Cyrus Cylinder: A Persian Edict and the Return of the Judean Exiles," *Biblical Archaeology Society*, December 4, 2025, https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/the-cyrus-cylinder/.

[151] Mark, "Ancient Persia."

[152] Isa. 44:28. This theme is continued through Isa. 45:13.

[153] Isa. 45:4.

[154] Ezek. 2:2; Ezra 2:64–65; Neh. 7:66–67. Importantly, most of the Jewish people remain in Persia. The returnees constitute only a portion of the Jewish population. Moreover, not all Jews are exiled in 586 B.C. (or before); some are left to care for the land. Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians do not always import populations into territories from which people had been exiled. Consequently, some native Judeans remain in Judah throughout the entire exilic period.

[155] Hag. 2:23; Zech. 4:14. Sheshbazzar is also called the governor of Judah in Ezra 1:8. Scholarship is divided as to whether Sheshbazzar is another name for Zerubbabel or a different person. If he is another person, he likely governs in Judah first, before Zerubbabel. Arnold and Beyer, 242.

[156] Ezra 3:1–6:22. The foundation for the Temple is laid in 536 B.C.

opposition from some Samaritans.[157] As a result, the Temple's rebuilding is halted for over a decade and a half.[158]

In Persia, Cyrus II's reign ends abruptly in 529 B.C., when he dies while fighting in Central Asia.[159] His son Cambyses II (r. 529–522 B.C.) inherits his father's empire. Cambyses successfully conquers Egypt in 525 B.C., resulting in the deposition of Psamtik III, the last native Pharaoh of Egypt. A few years later, in 522 B.C., Cambyses receives word that his brother, or an imposter claiming to be his brother, is working to usurp the throne. Cambyses dies shortly after, en route to Iran.[160] Darius, one of Cambyses's generals and a member of a collateral branch of the Achaemenid family, continues to Iran to stop the rebellion.[161]

Darius I (r. 522–486 B.C.) details his rise to power in the famous Behistun Inscription, a trilingual royal text carved into the rock face at Mount Bisotun near modern Kermanshah in western Iran. The inscription states that six important Achaemenid nobles helped kill the imposter claiming to be Cambyses's brother and proclaimed Darius as Cambyses's rightful heir and the new king of Persia.[162]

Darius, like Cyrus II, is often called "the Great" because of the scale, stability, and success of his rule. He expands the Persian Kingdom into the Indus River basin, near modern-day Pakistan. Westward, he gains firm control over Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and extends Persian rule to the coast of the Aegean Sea.[163]

In 490 B.C., Darius invades Greece but is defeated at the famous Battle of Marathon.

> The great king was forced to retreat and to face the fact that the Greek problem, which had probably seemed to the Persians a minor issue on the western extremity of the empire, would require a more concerted and massive effort. Thus began preparations for

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[157] These Samaritans descend from various peoples who moved into Samaria after the Assyrian conquest of Israel in 722 B.C.

[158] The Temple is not completed until 516 B.C., during the reign of Darius I.

[159] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*. Cyrus II dies in the region of the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers, which covers parts of modern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kazakhstan, and northern Afghanistan.

[160] Confusion remains as to whether he dies from a self-inflicted wound or from an infection caused by an accidental sword injury.

[161] Darius is the great-grandson of Ariaramnes, Cyrus I's brother. Remember, Teispes is said to have divided the Persian kingdom between his two sons, Cyrus I and Ariaramnes. However, Cyrus's son, Cambyses I, ultimately rules a reunited Persia as a Median vassal. Darius is from that other line, one that supposedly reaches back to Ariaramnes. So, Darius is of royal lineage, just not the same line as Cyrus I, Cambyses I, Cyrus II, and Cambyses II.

[162] Note that some historians are not convinced that Bardiya, the man claiming to be Cambyses II's brother, is actually an imposter. As a result, they see the Behistun Inscription as more propaganda than historical fact. "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[163] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

> an invasion of Greece on a grand, coordinated scale. These plans were interrupted in 486 by two events: a serious revolt in Egypt, and the death of Darius.[164]

Regarding Darius's legacy in Scripture, he is remembered favorably for upholding Cyrus II's decree permitting the exiled Judeans to return home and rebuild the Temple.[165] According to Ezra, work on the Temple resumes in "the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia" and is completed "in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king."[166]

Darius's son Xerxes I (r. 486–465 B.C.), the crown prince and ruler of Babylon, ascends the Persian throne after his father's death. He suppresses an Egyptian rebellion in 484 B.C., and "then broke with the policy followed by Cyrus and Darius of ruling foreign lands with a fairly light hand, and… ruthlessly ignored Egyptian forms of rule and imposed his will on the rebellious province…."[167] Xerxes launches a massive invasion of Greece, but he ultimately fails to conquer it after defeats in 480–479 B.C.

The book of Esther mentions Xerxes and specific events from his reign. King Ahasuerus is almost universally identified as Xerxes I.[168] Esther is chosen to replace Queen Vashti and eventually becomes instrumental, along with her uncle Mordecai, in saving the Jewish people from slaughter.[169]

The book of Esther begins in 483 B.C., which places the narrative between the first return under Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. and the second return led by Ezra in 458 B.C. Outside of the narrative surrounding Esther's life, Scripture is silent about what happens in the restoration community during this period. In fact, a 58-year gap exists in Ezra's narrative between the completion of the Temple in 516 B.C. and Ezra's return to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. As a result, "We know almost nothing about the restoration community during this interval. Although this author was intensely interested in history, his main concern was not to write a thorough history of the postexilic community but rather to trace the important religious and theological ideas that shaped that community."[170]

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[164] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[165] Ezra 5–6. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah minister during the reign of Darius I and are integral to the completion of the Temple. The priests and Levites are re-established at the same time (Ezra 6:14–18).

[166] Ezra 4:24; 5:15.

[167] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

[168] For example, the *ESV Study Bible* includes this footnote for Esth. 1:1: "Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek Name, Xerxes I, was king of Persia from 486–464 B.C." *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 2008.

[169] The Feast of Purim is a Jewish celebration that commemorates how God uses Mordecai and Esther to save His people from Haman's wicked plot to destroy them.

[170] Arnold and Beyer, 243.

Ezra's narrative picks back up in 458 B.C., eighty years after Zerubbabel's first return, when Ezra leads a second group of exiles from Persia back to Judea. His return occurs during the reign of Artaxerxes I (r. 465–424 B.C.), who becomes king after his father, Xerxes, is assassinated. Nehemiah's narrative occurs during Artaxerxes's reign as evidenced by Nehemiah 2:1. Nehemiah, along with an imperial entourage, arrives in Jerusalem around thirteen years after Ezra's return. The beginning of Nehemiah's book implies that "some recent catastrophe had befallen the city. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were in distress, and its walls lay in ruins (1:3)."[171] Nehemiah, as the appointed governor, oversees the rebuilding of the walls and continues to lead for twelve years before returning to Persia.[172] Apparently, shortly after his return to Persia, he travels back to Jerusalem, where he again leads the people in spiritual reform.[173]

Malachi is the primary prophet during Artaxerxes I's reign, though Zechariah's late ministry and Joel's prophetic ministry may also occur in this period. The end of Artaxerxes I's reign is around the time when the narrative of the Old Testament ends. Artaxerxes I and his successors, Xerxes II (r. 424 B.C.) and Darius II Ochus (r. 423–404 B.C.), "were all comparatively weak as individuals and as kings, and such successes as the empire enjoyed during their reigns were mainly the result of the efforts of subordinates or of the troubles faced by their adversaries."[174]

The Achaemenid Dynasty and the Persian Empire endure until Darius III (r. 336–330 B.C.) is defeated by Alexander the Great. Greek, and later Roman, domination serves as the backdrop for the events of the New Testament.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly sketched a historical outline for the great empires of the Old Testament age. Clearly, the information here, not to mention in the plethora of Old Testament histories that exist, can feel overwhelming. However, this history need not be a burden for us but a delight. Such studies remind us that the Bible is not a book of myths or platitudes. The Holy Scriptures are the very Word of God revealed in human history. As we seek to understand, teach, and preach the Bible, we must recognize that this Word is rooted in historical reality. Preachers need not be historians in an academic sense, but we must be committed to honoring the Word of God by seeking to understand the setting, background, and peoples of the biblical age.

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[171] Arnold and Beyer, 244.

[172] Neh. 13:6.

[173] Neh. 13:7–31.

[174] "Ancient Iran," *Britannica*.

Section 2: A 30,000-Foot Overview of Prophecy in the Old Testament

So far, this study has focused on the historical setting of the Old Testament, especially the relationship between God's people and the empires that rule the ancient Near East. Now that the broader historical context of the prophets is established, the next logical step is to provide an overview of biblical prophecy and to explore briefly the individual ministries of the classical prophets.

Terminology

Scripture employs several terms to describe prophetic ministry in Israel and Judah. Early prophets are sometimes referred to as "seers" or "gazers," emphasizing their role as recipients of divine insight. Scripture refers to Samuel as a seer and describes Balaam and Gad as gazers.[175] The most common term for a "prophet" is the Hebrew word *nābîʾ*.[176] The word refers to one who utters or proclaims God's message to His people. According to Yates, a prophet is "one qualified and called and commissioned to speak God's word to men."[177] The Greek term *prophētēs*, from which the English word "prophet" derives, likewise emphasizes speaking on behalf of another. Together, these terms underscore the prophet's role as God's authorized spokesman.

Stages of Development

When surveying the ministries of the prophets, scholars observe several stages in the development of the prophetic institution in Israel.[178] The stages include 1) Pre-monarchy prophecy, 2) Pre-classical prophecy, and 3) Classical prophecy.

The earliest phase of prophecy belongs to the pre-monarchy period, roughly extending to the twelfth century B.C.[179] During this time, prophets function primarily as leaders within the community. They serve not only as mouthpieces for God but also as figures of authority who guide Israel during its formative years. Their primary audience is the people rather than a royal court, since no monarchy yet exists.

Moses is an example of a prophet in this period. Samuel represents a transitional figure, bridging the pre-monarchical and monarchical eras by providing leadership during Israel's shift from a tribal confederation to an organized monarchy.

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[175] Both terms are used infrequently in Scripture. "Seer" occurs around a dozen times, and "gazer" appears approximately two dozen times.

[176] The term appears more than 300 times in the Old Testament.

[177] Yates, 2. In his *Notes on the History of Preaching*, V. L. Stanfield says this concerning *nābîʾ*, "The Hebrew word means 'to bubble over, to boil;' the passive suggests that the speaker is moved by an impulse over which he does not have complete control." See V. L. Stanfield, *Notes on the History of Preaching* (New Orleans: John T. Christian Library, repr., 2014), 1.

[178] Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 504.

[179] This period formally ends with the establishment of Israel's monarchy, around 1050 B.C.

With the establishment of the monarchy, prophecy enters the pre-classical period. In this phase, prophets function chiefly as royal advisors and messengers who speak to kings and their courts directly. Unlike later prophets, these figures do not produce independent canonical books. In other words, their prophetic activity is preserved only within the historical narratives of Israel and Judah. Biblical prophets such as Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha exemplify this phase of prophecy.

The final stage, classical prophecy, is the one most commonly associated with the Old Testament prophets. Emerging in the eighth century B.C. during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel, classical prophets address not only kings but also the people. Their role combines the proclamation of God's Word with social and spiritual commentary and critique. These prophets rebuke injustice, idolatry, and covenant unfaithfulness, warn of impending judgment in the form of exile and destruction, and offer hope for eventual restoration.[180]

How does biblical prophecy compare to prophecy in other Near Eastern nations? Prophecy during the pre-classical period most closely resembles prophecy elsewhere in the ancient Near East. For example, the so-called prophets of other nations generally direct their oracles to rulers rather than ordinary people. The Mari tablets preserve numerous prophecies addressed exclusively to kings.[181]

Interestingly, classical prophecy is unique within the ancient Near Eastern world. No true parallel exists outside Israel because biblical prophecy is rooted in the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people. Israel alone understands its God as sovereign over history, working toward a defined purpose and ultimate fulfillment. This eschatological orientation, grounded in God's self-revelation and covenant promises, distinguishes Israel's prophets from all other prophetic traditions of the ancient world.

Message

Contemporary readers may assume that the prophet's primary task is to foretell the future. While biblical prophets certainly prophesy about the future, they are more concerned with God's message to their original audience. In other words, the prophets are more often forth-tellers rather than fore-tellers. This is why the historical setting in which the prophets lived and ministered is crucial to understanding their message.[182]

A trap that preachers can fall into when teaching the prophets is becoming so enamored with discerning a passage's fulfillment that we miss the original message for the audience. While the fulfillment may at times be difficult to discern, the message is not hidden behind symbols. The message to the original audience, then, should be the primary focus of our study of any given

[180] The prophetic books of the Old Testament are collections of oracles delivered by these classical prophets, whose ministries span roughly 800 to 450 B.C.

[181] Arnold and Beyer, 324.

[182] Stanfield, 1.

prophetic passage. Hill and Walton help clarify the importance of discerning the message when they write:

> It is important to distinguish between the message of the prophecy and the fulfillment of the prophecy. The message is found in the proclamation of God's word to the contemporary audience (at least initially). The fulfillment comes in the unfolding of history. Each prophecy had a message as soon as it was proclaimed, independent of its eventual (and assured) fulfillment. Too often, the prophetic books are studied merely by seeking out potential fulfillments while overlooking the inspired message of God's words. This is a grave error.[183]

When the prophets convey their message, they employ a variety of oracle types, including indictment, judgment, instruction, and hope. Simply put, indictment oracles, sometimes called woe oracles, clearly describe specific sins the audience, whether king or common people, commit against God. Judgment oracles warn of punishment coming because of violations of God's covenant by His people or their leaders. Instruction oracles are ethical in nature. Generally, they disclose how the recipients are to conduct themselves before God and in society at large. Finally, hope (or restoration) oracles promise deliverance and renewal.[184]

Even so, the way the prophets describe the future can sometimes create confusion for modern readers. Prophetic perspectives on the future often compress events that unfold over extended periods of time. Like a mountain range viewed from a distance, prophets perceive major events without necessarily discerning the intervals between them. This phenomenon, sometimes described as prophetic foreshadowing, explains why prophetic texts may juxtapose near and distant events without a clear chronological distinction.[185]

A helpful illustration of this prophetic perspective is found in Micah 5:2–5. The prophet first mentions a ruler from Bethlehem who will rule over Israel. Could this refer to the Messiah? The chief priests and scribes in Herod the Great's time think so.[186] Yet verse five appears to anchor this person at a different point in history: "And this one will be our peace, when the Assyrian invades our land." The Assyrians are destroyed long before Jesus' birth. Micah is not in error. All the events are correct, but Micah and other Old Testament prophets do not always state the events in sequential order. Why not? Because the specifics of each prophecy are not always revealed to them. Some things will only make sense in the full revelation of the New Testament.

Another example appears in Hosea 11, where the prophet writes, "When Israel was a youth, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."[187] Clearly, Hosea is referring to the Exodus.

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[183] Hill and Walton, 408.

[184] Hill and Walton, 510.

[185] Paul Wegner, "Preaching from the Prophets," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* (Fall 2016), 92.

[186] Matt. 2:4–6.

[187] Hos. 11:1.

However, Matthew 2:15 records its fulfillment. Christ is brought out of Egypt. Nothing in Hosea's immediate historical context explicitly points to Christ; yet, in the fullness of divine revelation, the text is fulfilled in Christ.[188]

These texts demonstrate that the prophets are not gazing at crystal balls. Rather, they view future events like a mountain range: they can discern the peaks clearly, even if the valleys between them remain unseen. The distance between those peaks (that is, the time between events) is not always apparent from the prophet's vantage point. When interpreters focus primarily on reconstructing the future timeline, they risk missing the divine message that the prophet originally intended to convey.

Ultimately, the prophetic books are not given to satisfy curiosity about the future but to confront God's people with His Word. Proper interpretation, therefore, begins with the message to the original audience and only then considers the unfolding of fulfillment across the rest of Scripture. Within this framework, far from being obscure or cryptic, biblical prophecy is the clear and purposeful proclamation of God's message to real people in real historical circumstances, calling them, and us, to repentance, faith, and hope in God and His sovereign plans.

Brief Overview of the Classical Prophets

This section has examined the prophets as a group and focused on the broad elements of the prophetic office. Attention now turns from these general observations to specific overviews of each of the classical prophets. Doing so will clarify how the prophets intersect with biblical history and how their distinct messages shaped the people of God throughout history.

Eighth-Century Prophets

At the beginning of the eighth century B.C., conditions are relatively favorable in both Israel and Judah. In the northern kingdom, Jeroboam II's reign is marked by a period of political stability and territorial expansion. In Judah, Uzziah enjoys military and economic success. Outwardly, this is a time of prosperity and security. Nevertheless, beneath this stability, a far more ominous development is taking place: the rapid rise of Assyria under Tiglath-pileser III and his successors.

From about 738 B.C. onward, Assyria launches a series of military incursions into Israel. These campaigns steadily reduce the northern kingdom to a vassal state. Israel's independence is ultimately lost in 722 B.C., when Assyria conquers Samaria. The eighth-century prophets minister within this historical context.[189]

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[188] In 1 Pet. 1:10–11, Peter writes, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know the person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow." This text suggests that the prophets did not always fully understand the details of their prophecies.

[189] A more detailed account of this period is found on pages 8–10 of this document.

Jonah (c. 780–760 B.C.)

Jonah's ministry appears early in the eighth century B.C. The only explicit Old Testament reference to him outside the book that bears his name is found in 2 Kings 14:23–28, where he is identified as a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jonah's ministry unfolds during a time of ease and luxury in Israel. This prosperity fosters what Yates describes as an "ugly, narrow, and selfish nationalism" within Israel.[190] Against this backdrop of prosperity and nationalism, God calls Jonah to a startling mission to proclaim judgment in Assyrian territory, specifically in Nineveh.[191] Jonah detests Assyria because the empire represents brutality, idolatry, and a serious threat to Israel's future. He resists the mission because he fears the Ninevites will repent and receive mercy.

Unlike most prophetic books, the book of Jonah is best described as prophetic narrative. It recounts Jonah's ministry and the message God commissions him to proclaim. The entire book contains only one explicit oracle: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."[192]

The narrative centers on Jonah's call to proclaim judgment against Nineveh and his subsequent rebellion in fleeing toward Tarshish. A divinely sent storm leads to Jonah being thrown into the sea and swallowed by a great fish, where he remains for three days and nights. After repenting, God delivers him, and Jonah proceeds to Nineveh. There, his oracle leads to widespread repentance. God spares the city, and the book concludes abruptly with Jonah angered by God's mercy.

Interpretations of the book of Jonah have varied. Some have read the book allegorically, equating Jonah with Israel and Nineveh with the Gentile world. Others have suggested that the book is a parable, a view often favored in modern scholarship, though this interpretation struggles to account for the narrative's length and complexity, as well as the absence of an explicit interpretive key. Historically, the book of Jonah is understood as a record of real events, a view supported by Jesus' references to Jonah in Matthew 12:39–41 and Luke 11:29–30.

The central message of Jonah underscores God's compassion and concern for all peoples. Jonah himself stands in contrast to God's mercy, calling readers to examine their own hearts and consider whether they reflect God's love for the nations.

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[190] Yates, 187.

[191] Nineveh emerges as a major imperial center in the mid-eighth century B.C. and later becomes the capital of Assyria under Sennacherib. The city is destroyed by the Medes in 612 B.C. and is never rebuilt.

[192] Jonah 3:4.

Amos (c. 760 B.C.)

Amos's ministry begins shortly after Jonah's concludes, during the reigns of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel.[193] This period is one of remarkable prosperity in Israel, marked by luxury and economic expansion, but also by deep moral and spiritual corruption.[194]

Socially, the wealthy accumulate riches through injustice, while the poor are oppressed. Religiously, the people remain outwardly devout, frequenting sanctuaries at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba. Yet their worship is hollow, detached from righteousness and justice. Religious leaders are complicit, preaching messages that affirm people in their sin rather than calling them to repentance.

Amos is born in Tekoa, a small village approximately 12 miles south of Jerusalem, in a region characterized by isolation and rugged terrain. He is raised in a rural context very different from the urban and affluent society he confronts in Israel. He is not part of a prophetic guild, and his call comes directly from God, who takes him from tending flocks and commissions him to prophesy to Israel.[195]

Amos is sent primarily to Bethel, the religious center of the northern kingdom, where Jeroboam II worships. Despite the abundance of religious activity, the people feel no need for correction. Amos's preaching challenges this complacency, leading to conflict with Amaziah, the priest at Bethel. While Amaziah relies on royal support, Amos stands boldly in confidence of divine authority. Eventually, Amos is expelled from Israel and presumably returns home, where his prophecies are preserved.

The book of Amos is generally divided into several sections: judgment oracles against the nations and Israel in chapters 1–4, a call to repentance in chapter 5, warnings and judgments in chapters 6:1–7:9, narrative conflict in 7:10–17, visions of coming judgment in chapters 8:1–9:10, and concluding with promises of restoration in 9:11–15. Amos's enduring message affirms God's sovereignty over all nations, His nearness to humanity, His impartial justice, and His gracious concern for both rich and poor.

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[193] Amos 1:1; 7:10–11. While the start of Amos's ministry is relatively easy to date, its conclusion is less clear. His prophetic activity likely lasts only a few years, though this remains conjectural. Following his confrontation with Amaziah at Bethel, Amos appears to have been forced to leave Israel, and the biblical text offers no further account of his ministry.

[194] Amos 2:6; 5:18.

[195] Amos is often regarded as a poor shepherd; however, debate persists regarding his economic status. The Hebrew term describing his occupation elsewhere denotes a wealthy sheep breeder, suggesting that Amos may have been relatively prosperous. See Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, Understanding the Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

Hosea (c. 755–715 B.C.)

Hosea ministers in the northern kingdom during its final decades. His ministry begins near the end of Jeroboam II's reign and extends into the period of Hezekiah in Judah.[196] Unlike Amos's era of prosperity, Hosea's context is marked by decline, fear, and instability as Israel moves inexorably toward its fall in 722 B.C.

Political and social instability intensifies corruption among the wealthy elite. Poverty becomes widespread, marriages disintegrate, and idolatry permeates society. Religiously, the priesthood deteriorates, failing to teach God's law and actively leading the people into sin. Worship becomes formalized and morally undemanding. Hosea confronts Israel's self-deception, calling the people to repentance.[197]

Hosea's personal life embodies his message. A native of the northern kingdom, he marries Gomer in obedience to God's command. While interpretations vary, many scholars conclude that Gomer is initially faithful and later becomes unfaithful, mirroring Israel's relationship with God. His book divides naturally into chapters 1–3, which recount his personal experience, and chapters 4–14, which present his prophetic message to Israel.

Isaiah (c. 740–680 B.C.)

The mid-to-late eighth century B.C. is significant beyond the borders of Israel and Judah. Rome is founded around 753 B.C., and Greek city-states such as Sparta and Athens are taking shape. Isaiah, along with Micah, ministers in Judah at a time when Babylon is not yet the dominant world power and remains overshadowed by Assyria. Judah exists within a rapidly shifting international landscape, though the full implications are not yet apparent to its people.

Socially, Judah is marked by deep corruption. Government officials abuse their authority, and the seizure of land is common.[198] Judean society is sharply divided between the powerful and the vulnerable; effectively, no middle class exists. Religiously, the people rebel against God's mission. Instead of exporting the knowledge of the Lord to the nations, they import false gods and pagan practices into Judah. This includes the worship of Molech, a Canaanite deity associated with child sacrifice.[199] God sends Isaiah into these dire circumstances to call His people to repentance.

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[196] Hosea 1:1 connects Hosea to both Jeroboam II and Hezekiah. Hosea's ministry begins later in Jeroboam II's reign, probably shortly after Amos's ministry concludes.

[197] Hos. 12:8, "Ephraim has said, 'Ah, but I am rich; I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they cannot find in me iniquity or sin.'"

[198] Property could be taken without explanation, leaving ordinary people to live in fear. For example, Isa. 5:8 reads, "Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land."

[199] Isa. 30:33 discusses Topheth, the location where child sacrifices are offered to the god Molech. See Jer. 7:31 and 19:5 for additional information.

Isaiah is born around the mid-eighth century B.C., roughly the same time Amos is preaching in Israel. His ministry begins in 740 B.C., the year King Uzziah dies and extends for approximately forty years.[200] Isaiah is married and has at least two sons.[201] As a statesman, he stands among the most politically engaged of the prophets. He understands international politics clearly and interprets them through the lens of God's sovereignty. As a preacher of social righteousness, he stands among the strongest voices in the prophetic tradition.

The sixty-six chapters in Isaiah's book reflect the breadth of this ministry. Chapters 1–39 address the Assyrian threat of the late eighth- and early seventh-century B.C. Chapters 40–55 look ahead to the Babylonian exile of the sixth century, while chapters 56–66 extend beyond that to speak of future restoration and God's ultimate purposes. Some scholars argue that the shift in tone and historical setting in chapters 40–66 indicates a later author, often referred to as Deutero-Isaiah. However, the coherence of language and theology throughout the book supports single authorship. Furthermore, Jesus and the New Testament writers consistently attribute these passages to Isaiah himself, as seen in John 12:38–41.

Through Isaiah, God announces both judgment and hope. The prophet warns of impending judgment for sin while also proclaiming future restoration. Ultimately, the book is about God Himself: His sovereignty over the nations, His use of kings and empires to fulfill His purposes, and His commitment to His promises. Isaiah repeatedly points forward to a coming Messiah from the lineage of David, a Savior who will one day establish a new world in which sin and sorrow are no more.

Several major themes dominate Isaiah's prophecy. One is the concept of the remnant. Isaiah describes a faithful group preserved by God even in judgment. Though exile will come, God will one day bring this remnant home. Another theme is the sovereignty of God. Isaiah boldly declares that God rules the nations and exercises sovereign authority over them, prophesying both judgment and restoration.

The servant theme also appears throughout the book, sometimes referring to an individual, sometimes to Israel, sometimes to the faithful remnant, and ultimately to the Messiah.[202] The suffering servant of Isaiah 52–53 finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Isaiah presents a rich and complex portrait of the Messiah, who will one day reign in glory but first suffers on behalf of His people.

Micah (c. 735–700 B.C.)

Micah ministers during the same general period as Isaiah and confronts similar social conditions in Judah. The seizure of land remains common, immorality is widespread, and religious leaders

[200] Isaiah's book records events as late as the death of Sennacherib in 681 B.C.

[201] Isa. 7:3; 8:3.

[202] Isa. 40:8–9; 44:1–2; 49:5–6; 50; 52–53.

are corrupt. Priests, prophets, and rulers alike exploit the people while claiming that the Lord's presence guarantees their security.[203] Religiously, the people resist faithful preaching. As Yates observes, "The people did not want any preaching done except the weak, insipid variety that would allow them to go on their way without embarrassment. It is a tragic hour when people will hear only the man who panders to their selfish, immoral nature."[204]

Micah is born about twenty miles from Jerusalem in the Judean countryside. Though from a rural background, he resides along a major trade route connecting Assyria and Egypt, exposing him to the broader world.[205] His power comes not from position or wealth but from the Spirit of the Lord, who fills him with justice and courage to declare Judah's sin.[206]

His ministry emphasizes social justice in the tradition of Elijah and Amos. Micah 6:8 stands as a defining summary of his message. The text reads, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

The book of Micah contains both oracles of judgment and promises of salvation. God lists the transgressions of His people—idolatry, injustice, oppression, and religious corruption—while also promising restoration. Micah prophesies the fall of Samaria (1:6–7), the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (3:12, 7:13), the Babylonian exile (4:10), the return from captivity (4:1–8; 7:11, 14–17), the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem (4:8; 5:2–4), and a future age of universal peace (4:1–5). His name, meaning "Who is like Yahweh?" captures the heart of his message: no one is like God, who rightly punishes sin yet graciously provides forgiveness and restoration.[207]

Seventh-Century Prophets

The seventh century B.C. opens with a radically altered political landscape. The northern kingdom has fallen to Assyria in 722 B.C., and Judah survives, but only as a semi-independent kingdom. A Davidic king still sits on the throne, yet Judah now exists as a vassal state under Assyrian dominance.

Judah's leadership during this century plays a decisive role in shaping its fate. Hezekiah's reign proves significant because, beginning around 705 B.C., he intentionally distances Judah from Assyria. He also implements meaningful religious reforms, seeking to steer the nation back toward covenant faithfulness to God. His son Manasseh follows him and largely reverses these

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[203] Mic. 2:2; 3:2; 11.

[204] Yates, 111.

[205] In Mic. 1:1, Micah states that he is "of Moresheth," which is located in the Shephelah region. Although the main branch of the Via Maris ran along the coastal plain, key access routes pass through the Shephelah's valleys, positioning the region as a critical gateway between Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Judean highlands.

[206] Mic. 3:8.

[207] Yates, 117–18.

efforts. Manasseh realigns Judah politically with Assyria and actively works to undo his father's religious reforms. After Manasseh, Josiah, echoing the reforms of his grandfather Hezekiah, once again attempts to throw off the Assyrian yoke and initiates widespread religious reforms of his own.

Around 609 B.C., Pharaoh Necho II marches north to support Assyria. At the Battle of Megiddo, King Josiah confronts Necho and is killed. After Josiah's death, Judah enters a period of disastrous leadership. Jehoiakim makes a series of terrible political choices. Initially, he supports Egypt, but this allegiance collapses after the Battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.), where Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians decisively defeat Assyria and Egypt. Following Babylon's victory, Jehoiakim shifts his loyalty to Babylon. In 601 B.C., however, Babylon attempts and fails to conquer Egypt, prompting Jehoiakim once again to change sides and pledge allegiance to Egypt. This decision proves fatal. In 598 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar moves against Judah. Jehoiakim dies around this time. His son Jehoiachin immediately surrenders, and Babylon carries away roughly ten thousand captives in the first major Babylonian deportation.

In the mid-590s B.C., Babylon becomes preoccupied with internal unrest, and several subject nations, including Judah, seize the moment to rebel. Zedekiah, the last Davidic king, fails to learn from his predecessors' mistakes. His rebellion leads to catastrophe. In 586 B.C., Babylon destroys Jerusalem and the Temple, decisively defeating Judah. The seventh-century prophets, including Jeremiah, minister within this turbulent context.

Nahum (c. 660–630 B.C.)[208]

Nahum's prophetic ministry focuses almost entirely on Nineveh, the seemingly invincible capital of the Assyrian Empire. The city's walls rise nearly fifty feet high and extend roughly seven miles in circumference. Reportedly, the walls are so wide that three chariots could ride side by side along their tops. In 612 B.C., Nineveh falls and is never rebuilt, fulfilling Nahum's prophecy of its total destruction.[209] So complete is Nineveh's fall that Alexander the Great reportedly does not recognize the site when he passes through the region in 331 B.C., and the city's remains are not discovered until A.D. 1842.

Little is known about Nahum personally. He comes from Elkosh, though its location remains uncertain. His name means "compassion." Like Jonah, he reflects intense national loyalty and announces God's judgment against Assyria. Nahum's style is dramatic and vivid, yet the book is driven by a single, unmistakable theme: judgment. Nahum 1:3 expresses the central theme of the book: "The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet." Overall, Nahum's message is concise and uncompromising.

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[208] The fall of Thebes appears as a past event (Nah. 3:8–10), while Nineveh's fall remains future, placing Nahum's ministry between 663 and 612 B.C. Since Assyria weakens significantly after 640 B.C., Nahum most likely prophesies sometime in the mid-to-late seventh century.

[209] Nah. 1.

Zephaniah (c. 640–620 B.C.)

Zephaniah's ministry occurs during the reign of Josiah. However, scholars debate whether his ministry occurred before or after Josiah's reforms. According to Bullock, "The majority opinion is that Zephaniah prophesied before Josiah's reform of 622 (2 Kings 22:1–23:30; 2 Chron. 34–35)." However, some scholars argue that his ministry followed the reforms.[210]

Regarding Zephaniah's personal life, he is the only prophet whose genealogy includes four generations, which may indicate social prominence. Yates argues that "Zephaniah was an aristocrat who did not pose as a spokesman of the peasant."[211] While that language may be too strong, the point remains that "he was a very important man."[212]

The book of Zephaniah centers on the theme of "the day of the Lord," a time when God intervenes either in judgment or in deliverance. Both dimensions appear clearly in the book. Zephaniah announces impending judgment on Judah, ultimately at the hands of a foreign power, later realized in Babylon, while also proclaiming salvation for all nations who humble themselves before the Lord. Zephaniah affirms that God desires inward renewal, and the book closes with a powerful picture of God delighting in the restoration of His people.

The structure of Zephaniah reinforces his bi-focal emphasis on the day of the Lord. Chapter 1 opens with a pronouncement of coming judgment on idolaters. Chapter 2 calls the people to repentance, emphasizing that while national judgment is unavoidable, genuine repentance may yet preserve a faithful remnant. Chapter 3 moves from judgment to hope, culminating in a vision of restoration and divine joy. Overall, the book combines severe warnings with a profound message of hope.

Habakkuk (c. 620–605 B.C.)

Reconstructing the historical background of Habakkuk is difficult for two primary reasons. First, little is known about him personally. Second, scholars disagree about when his ministry took place.[213] Some strands of Jewish tradition place Habakkuk during the reign of Manasseh, while others date portions of the book much later, even into the Hellenistic period, with numerous proposals falling between these extremes. For example, Bullock places Habakkuk's ministry around 640 B.C., while Chalmers situates the prophet after Babylon's invasion of Judah in 597 B.C.[214] Although this issue may at first glance seem unimportant to preaching Habakkuk, one's interpretation of the book is deeply affected by the prophet's historical setting. Is Habakkuk

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[210] C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. James Martin, repr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 2:119–20.

[211] Yates, 165.

[212] Bullock, 199. Some scholars identify Hizkiyyah in the genealogy with King Hezekiah; however, this interpretation remains debated. See Bullock, 198–99.

[213] The dating issue centers on the identification of the enemy in Hab. 1:2–4, 12–17.

[214] Bullock, 221; Chalmers, 52.

responding to Manasseh's wickedness, Assyrian domination, Babylonian aggression, or something else entirely?

Habakkuk is an unusual book in that much of the content consists of a dialogue between the prophet and God. In chapters 1–2, the prophet voices a complaint to God because He does not appear to be addressing the moral and spiritual decline in Judah. When God responds that He will raise up a foreign power to judge Judah, the prophet then questions the justice of using a more wicked nation as an instrument of judgment. However, in Habakkuk 3:1–19, the prophet ultimately yields to God's purpose.[215] According to the *ESV Study Bible*, "By the end of the book, Habakkuk is a changed person—he has learned to wait and trust in God, who works out all things for his glory."[216]

Jeremiah (c. 626–586 B.C.)

Jeremiah emerges as one of the most significant biblical figures of the late seventh and early sixth centuries. His ministry spans approximately forty years, making it one of the longest prophetic ministries in Scripture. He is the only seventh-century prophet whose life and ministry are narrated across multiple Old Testament books.[217] Nevertheless, the vast majority of information about his life is found in the book that bears his name.

Jeremiah is born in Anathoth into the family of the priest Hilkiah. Jeremiah remains unmarried and childless, a condition commanded by the Lord as a sign of coming judgment. His call, which occurs early in his life, emphasizes God's divine initiative. The Lord knows him, forms him, consecrates him, and appoints him. The responsibility for Jeremiah's ministry rests not on the prophet himself but on God, who places his word directly into Jeremiah's mouth.

Jeremiah's personality sets him apart. He is introspective and deeply sensitive yet driven by God's call on his life. He becomes convinced of God's inescapable will, both for his own life and for the fate of nations. Often called the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah may be better described as the "misunderstood prophet." He faces rejection from family, priests, and people alike, faithfully proclaiming God's message even as he suffers personally.

The book of Jeremiah focuses on covenant faithfulness. God, through Jeremiah, recalls Israel's early devotion and explains that coming judgment results directly from covenant betrayal. The people, however, prefer the reassuring messages of false prophets. Nevertheless, God also promises restoration. In chapters 30–33, often called The Book of Consolation, Jeremiah announces a new covenant that cannot be broken, written on hearts rather than on stone.

Closely associated with Jeremiah is the book of Lamentations, likely written shortly after Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C. Composed as a series of acrostic poems, Lamentations gives voice

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[215] Arnold and Beyer, 449–50.

[216] *ESV Study Bible*, 1719.

[217] 2 Chron. 36:12, 21; Ezra 1:1; Dan. 9:2.

to the grief of a people devastated by war, humiliation, and exile. The book wrestles openly with suffering and divine judgment while clinging to hope grounded in God's steadfast love.

Exilic and Postexilic Prophets

The political landscape during the exilic and postexilic periods is dramatically different from that of the seventh century. After Nebuchadnezzar II's death in 562 B.C., the Babylonian Empire weakens, creating an opportunity for eastern powers, first Media and then Persia under Cyrus, to expand. One of the Median vassals is Cyrus, king of Persia. The Babylonian king Nabonidus likely views Cyrus's campaigns against the Medes favorably, since a weakened Media benefits Babylon. By 550 B.C., Cyrus succeeds in bringing the Median Empire under his control. However, Cyrus then turns his attention to Babylon and, in 539 B.C., captures it, effectively ending the Babylonian Empire.

In 538 B.C., Cyrus issues his famous decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple, as recorded in Ezra 1–2. This decree marks a decisive turning point, but the return does not proceed smoothly. Opposition from the surrounding peoples of the land, along with the political instability following Cyrus's death in 530 B.C., halts progress on the Temple. Although the foundation of the Temple is laid (Ezra 3:8−13), reconstruction does not resume until Darius takes the throne in 522 B.C. Under his reign, the Temple is completed within four years, from 520 to 516 B.C., largely through the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah and the leadership of the Judean governor Zerubbabel.

A later wave of exiles returns to Judah in the middle of the fifth century. Ezra arrives in Jerusalem in 458 B.C. and institutes significant religious and covenantal reforms. Nehemiah follows in 445 B.C., serving as governor and overseeing the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Malachi appears to minister during this same general period, likely in the mid-fifth century, though scholars debate whether his ministry precedes, coincides with, or follows the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah. In the turbulence of this period, the exilic and postexilic prophets proclaim God's Word.

Daniel (c. 605–536 B.C.)

The book of Daniel divides naturally into two halves. The first six chapters consist of narrative accounts describing Daniel and his companions—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—as they navigate life in exile.[218] Daniel 1 records their early experiences in Babylon and their profound allegiance to God and His commands, no matter the cost. In time, Daniel rises to prominence in the Babylonian court. Through God's power, he interprets dreams and offers valuable counsel to Nebuchadnezzar II.[219] In chapter 3, his friends continue to demonstrate their faithfulness to God in the fiery furnace. Chapters 4–6 recount Nebuchadnezzar II's humbling, the writing on the wall and the fall of Babylon under Belshazzar, and Daniel's deliverance from the lions' den under

[218] Daniel and his friends are part of the earliest group of Judean exiles taken to Babylon in 605 B.C.

[219] Dan. 2; 4.

Darius the Mede. The events of the book span from approximately 605 B.C., during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, to about 536 B.C., the third year of Cyrus the Persian.

The final six chapters primarily consist of Daniel's visions. Chapters 7 and 8 recount visions about the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms as well as the overall sovereignty of "the Ancient of Days." Chapter 9 records Daniel's prayer of confession and intercession. The last three chapters present eschatological visions of spiritual conflict culminating in the resurrection and final judgment.

Taken together, Daniel's message is clear. Kings and kingdoms rise and fall, but God remains sovereign over all nations. For people living in exile, this assurance offers hope and stability. The same message continues to encourage God's people to remain faithful, grounded in confident assurance of God's ultimate triumph and eternal victory.

Ezekiel (c. 593–571 B.C.)

Ezekiel is a priest, yet his ministry unfolds among the Judean exiles in Babylon rather than in the Jerusalem Temple. He is deported in 597 B.C., during the first major Babylonian deportation, and receives his prophetic call in 593 B.C. while living by the Chebar River. God commands him to eat a scroll as a sign of internalizing the divine message and then commissions him as His prophet.[220] His last recorded message dates to 571 B.C., giving him one of the longest prophetic ministries in the Old Testament.

The book opens with the words, "In the thirtieth year … the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel …"; thus begins one of the longest and most fascinating books in the Bible.[221] According to Miller:

> The book is filled with strong language and vivid imagery. In addition to several detailed visions (1:4–3:15; 8:1–11:25; 37:1–14; 40:1–43:12), Ezekiel announces both judgment and hope using what is referred to as "street theatre," in which he would act out symbolic actions (4:1–5:17; 12:3–6; 24:16–18; 37:16–17), striking parables (24:1–14), and analogies that were at times harsh and graphic (16:1–58; 23:1–49).[222]

Throughout the early part of the book, Ezekiel refutes the false hope of a quick return from exile. Even though Ezekiel is part of the first wave of exiles (eleven years before the fall of Jerusalem) and lives in Babylon, he proclaims a message of judgment against his fellow Judeans for their blatant rebellion against God, evidenced in idolatry and immorality. In doing so, Ezekiel gives theological meaning and purpose to the exile itself, showing that the exile is not a sign of God's absence but an expression of His righteous judgment.

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[220] Ezek. 2–3.

[221] Only Genesis, Psalms, and Jeremiah are longer.

[222] Mike Miller, *Ezekiel* (handout, "Preaching from the Old Testament Prophets," New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 2011).

After the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Ezekiel's message shifts toward hope and future restoration. He proclaims an everlasting covenant of peace that will bring new life through a new heart and a new spirit.

Obadiah (c. 586–553 B.C.)

Little is known about the prophet Obadiah, though the name itself is common in the Old Testament and means "servant of Yahweh." The prophet should not be confused with the royal official mentioned in 1 Kings 18, who lives nearly three centuries earlier. Obadiah's message likely dates to sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., but before the decline of Edom in the mid-sixth century.[223]

Some scholars argue that Obadiah is the earliest of the writing prophets, pointing to similarities between Obadiah and Jeremiah 49:7–22, where Jeremiah appears either to quote Obadiah or to draw on a shared earlier source. Nevertheless, a straightforward reading of Obadiah suggests that the prophet writes in the aftermath of Nebuchadnezzar II's invasion of Judah in 586 B.C. The book, the shortest in the Old Testament, records a prophetic vision announcing judgment against Edom for its violent mistreatment of Israelites fleeing Jerusalem during the Babylonian conquest. At the same time, Obadiah proclaims God's sovereignty over all nations and looks forward to the establishment of God's kingdom over those who currently oppress His people.

Understanding Edom is essential for grasping Obadiah's message. The Edomites descend from Esau and occupy territory south of the Dead Sea, stretching roughly one hundred miles long and fifty miles wide. Petra, Edom's capital, is one of the most famous cities of the ancient world. The city's cliffs tower to heights exceeding 700 feet and could repel most invasions. Furthermore, Petra serves as an important regional trade center.

Throughout the Old Testament, Edom functions as Israel's perpetual enemy. During the Exodus, the Edomites refuse Israel passage through their land.[224] They oppose God's people during the conquest of the land and later fight against Judah during the reign of Ahaz.[225] Obadiah recounts Edom's cruelty when they actively capture fleeing Israelites and hand them over to the Babylonians during Jerusalem's destruction. The Edomites appear again when Judas Maccabeus campaigns against them in 164 B.C.,[226] before they are finally conquered by John Hyrcanus, who forcibly converts them to Judaism.[227] Known thereafter as the Idumaeans in Greek and Roman

[223] The book is dated by the following internal evidence: in Obad. 10–14 Jerusalem's destruction has already occurred, while in Obad. 15–18, Edom's destruction is imminent but not yet realized. Thus, Obadiah's ministry likely falls between 586 B.C. and 553 B.C.

[224] Num. 20.

[225] 2 Chron. 28:16–17.

[226] 1 Mac. 5:3, 65.

[227] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.257–58.

sources, they appear in New Testament times but disappear as a distinct people around the time of the Temple's destruction in A.D. 70.

The focus of Obadiah's message is this: Though Edom is strong and fortified, God will bring them down on "the day of the LORD," which is coming for all nations.[228] Pride and violence lead to Edom's destruction, but God will bring salvation to His people and establish His eternal kingdom.

Haggai (c. 520 B.C.)

In addition to his brief book, Haggai also appears in Ezra chapters 5–6. Along with Zechariah, God uses Haggai to spur the returned exiles to finish the rebuilding of the Temple. Unlike most prophets, whose ministries can only be dated generally, Haggai's messages are dated to specific days and months. The book records events that occur between August 29 and December 18, 520 B.C.[229]

The book consists of four brief prophetic messages along with a short narrative section. In the first oracle, Haggai rebukes the returned exiles for neglecting the rebuilding of the Temple.[230] In the second, he reassures them of God's abiding presence.[231] After the people resume their work, the remaining messages exhort them to persevere and complete the important task of Temple reconstruction.[232] Through Haggai, God reaffirms His commitment to the Davidic line, pointing forward to the fulfillment of His messianic promises.[233]

The reason for Haggai's ministry is straightforward. God's people have been given a clear mission, to rebuild the Temple, yet after encountering opposition, the work ceases for sixteen years. During that time, the people become comfortable, constructing homes for themselves while neglecting the house of the Lord. The Temple is meant to signify God's presence among His people, but their focus turns inward rather than Godward. God uses Haggai to stir the people back to obedience and to encourage them with the promise of a greater future glory associated with the coming Messiah. The enduring lesson is that God calls His people to faithful obedience and graciously enables them to complete the work He has given them to do.

Zechariah (c. 520–518 B.C.)

Zechariah ministers alongside Haggai and likewise spurs the people to complete the rebuilding of the Temple. He is a priest who returns from Babylon with Zerubbabel around 538 B.C. His

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[228] Obad. 15.

[229] Exact dates are provided in Hag. 1:1; 2:1, 10, 20.

[230] Hag. 1:1–11.

[231] Hag. 2:1–9.

[232] Hag. 2:10–23.

[233] Hag. 2:23.

prophetic ministry begins on October 27, 520 B.C., and continues at least until December 4, 518 B.C.[234] Zechariah demonstrates extensive knowledge of the preexilic Scriptures and regularly echoes the language of earlier prophets.[235]

The book of Zechariah is one of the longest among the Minor Prophets and is heavily apocalyptic in nature. Much of the book consists of visions that employ vivid and symbolic imagery to reveal spiritual realities. The first six chapters consist largely of apocalyptic night visions, though apocalyptic themes reappear in chapters 9–14. Through these visions, Zechariah reveals how God is working out His sovereign purposes in history and points forward to the coming of the Messiah, who is both a suffering servant and a reigning king. Zechariah is frequently cited in the New Testament, with dozens of clear references and allusions. Many of these occur in Revelation, which also draws heavily on imagery from Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Like Haggai, Zechariah addresses a people who have been given the task of rebuilding the Temple but have allowed the work to stall for sixteen years. God uses both prophets to motivate the people, though in complementary ways. Haggai urges the people to rebuild, while Zechariah calls them to spiritual renewal. Zechariah directs their attention to God's sovereign plan and encourages them with the promise of a glorious consummation of the ages under the rule of the Messiah. His central challenge remains deeply personal: the most pressing question is whether one is truly right with God.[236]

Malachi (c. 460–430 B.C.)

Malachi is the final prophetic voice of the Old Testament. Although the book provides no explicit dates, several clues help narrow the period of his ministry. Malachi's reference to a "governor" points to the Persian period, when that title is used for regional officials.[237] Since the Temple is functioning, Malachi ministers after its completion in 516 B.C.[238] Yet the spiritual apathy he confronts suggests that some time has passed since the Temple's completion. Additionally, Malachi rebukes the same sins addressed by Ezra and Nehemiah, indicating that he is either a predecessor to or a contemporary of one or both of them. The most likely date for Malachi's ministry, therefore, falls in the early to mid-fifth century B.C.

Malachi's prophecies indicate a state of spiritual apathy and a lack of commitment, rather than outright rebellion by the people. Malachi calls for a return to covenant faithfulness by rebuking

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[234] For exact dates, see Zech. 1:1, 7; 7:1.

[235] After the destruction of the Temple, many priests increasingly devote themselves to the study of Scripture in the absence of sacrificial duties.

[236] Mike Miller, *Zechariah* (handout, "Preaching from the Old Testament Prophets," New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 2011).

[237] Mal. 1:8.

[238] Mal. 1:10; 3:1, 8.

the people for their worship, offerings, marriage practices, and failure to uphold social justice. He also looks ahead to the coming messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord.[239]

What accounts for the people's apathy? Although the Temple has been rebuilt, the manifest glory of the Lord has not returned as they expected. Cynicism sets in, leading to a form of dead orthodoxy. In other words, their doctrine and religious practices are technically correct, but their hearts are hardened and distant from God. Malachi issues a wake-up call, urging the people to renew their commitment to the Lord and to live faithfully within the covenant. His message remains relevant today: correct doctrine and proper practice must be accompanied by genuine devotion. Both are essential for true covenant faithfulness.

Joel (c. 900–400 B.C.)[240]

The date of Joel's ministry is highly uncertain. Some scholars argue for a preexilic setting, noting that Joel's emphasis on the "day of the Lord" parallels themes found in several earlier prophets. Moreover, the absence of explicit references to Assyria or Babylon is often taken to suggest a time prior to the rise of the major empires. Other scholars favor a postexilic date, pointing out that Joel 3:2–3 appears to treat the exile as a past event, that Jerusalem's conquest is assumed (3:17), and that no king is mentioned anywhere in the book.[241]

Little is known about the prophet himself or the specific circumstances of his ministry. A devastating locust plague has struck the land, but its precise historical context remains uncertain.[242] Joel's repeated references to Judah and Jerusalem, along with his familiarity with Temple worship, suggest that he comes from Judah and possibly even from Jerusalem itself. In response to this national calamity, God calls the people through Joel to lament, repent, and return to Him.

The central theme of Joel's prophecy focuses on "the day of the Lord," a time when God intervenes decisively in history, bringing either judgment or deliverance. On that day, the wicked are destroyed, while God's people are rescued. Joel presents the day of the Lord as encompassing both God's recurring historical interventions and the future final judgment. Because of this, the people are urged to get their hearts right with God in order to avert impending calamity or endure it faithfully. Joel's message ultimately points forward to a final day of divine reckoning when God's justice and salvation will be fully revealed.

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this chapter has been to provide a broad overview of the biblical role, development, and message of the prophets, along with a survey of the major prophetic voices.

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[239] Mal. 4:4–5; Matt. 11:10–14; 17:10–13.

[240] Arnold and Beyer, 434.

[241] Arnold and Beyer, 434.

[242] Joel 1:4.

The prophets are inextricably linked to the history of God's people. Although they fulfill many functions within Israel's story, their highest calling is to serve as God's authorized spokesmen. Their enduring legacy is that they spoke the very Word of God. Throughout history, God has ensured that His people would not be without His revelation.

One important caution must be noted: preachers today are sometimes described as prophets, but this terminology is misleading. In Scripture, prophets are uniquely commissioned to proclaim divine revelation. They speak God's message, not their own. Today, preachers speak God's Word when they read and faithfully explain the Scriptures, but their sermons do not constitute new revelation. Rather, preaching consists of the exposition and application of the revelation already given.

Preachers, therefore, are not prophets but heralds. They are not called to deliver new messages from God but to proclaim the message He has already revealed in His Word.

Section 3: A 30,000-Foot Overview of Jeremiah

Introduction

In 1877, Phillips Brooks delivers a series of lectures as part of the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale University. In one of those lectures, he defines preaching as the bringing of "truth through personality."[243] His understanding of preaching is incarnational: the preacher cannot be separated from the message he proclaims. While Brooks's definition applies to all preachers, his insight seems especially relevant for the study of the prophet Jeremiah. Not only does Jeremiah's book occupy more space in the Bible than any other, but much of its content is deeply personal. Readers sense his struggles and can sympathize with his pain. Hill and Walton exemplify this when they write:

> He was a man sent by God at Israel's darkest hour and proclaimed God's word at great personal cost for over forty years. More than any other, he provides us with glimpses of a prophet struggling with the God he served faithfully and with the message he was commissioned to deliver. His piety and integrity stood out as beacons in a generation that was to feel the scorching heat of the wrath of God. Jeremiah was their last chance, and he felt crushed under the weight of that responsibility.
>
> Because of the great personal struggles of Jeremiah, we learn more about his personality than that of any other prophet. This information helps us to feel as though we know him as an individual.[244]

Although the context is very different, many pastors today also feel burdened by the weight of their ministries. In a Barna survey conducted at the end of 2021, 38% of pastors considered leaving full-time ministry. In that same study, researchers found that in the under-45 age group, a staggering 46% of pastors had seriously contemplated quitting ministry.[245] A study of Jeremiah and his ministry may not relieve the burden of ministry, but it can remind pastors that they are not alone. For these reasons, a brief overview of Jeremiah's life is helpful before analyzing his book.

Brief Biography

Jeremiah emerges as one of the most significant biblical figures of the late seventh and early sixth centuries. His ministry spans approximately forty years, making it one of the longest prophetic tenures in Scripture. He is the only seventh-century prophet whose life and ministry are narrated across multiple Old Testament books.[246] However, most of the information about his life comes from the book that bears his name.

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[243] Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (London: H. R. Allenson, 1903), 5.

[244] Hill and Walton, 425.

[245] Barna Group, "38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," Barna, November 16, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/.

[246] 2 Chron. 36:12, 21; Ezra 1:1; Dan. 9:2.

He is born in Anathoth into the family of the priest Hilkiah. The exact location of Anathoth is still debated, but the modern village of Anata, approximately three miles northeast of Jerusalem, is a strong candidate.[247] David recruits Abiezer from Anathoth, and Solomon later banishes Abiathar the high priest to the same town.[248] Jeremiah may have been a descendant of Abiathar through the Anathoth connection, but this assertion is speculative, since another priestly family could also have lived there. Regarding his father Hilkiah, a man by the same name discovers the law scroll in the Temple in 622 B.C. However, "there is no basis in Jeremiah or Kings for connecting the two."[249] Jeremiah remains unmarried and childless, a condition commanded by the Lord as a sign of coming judgment. Jeremiah 16:1–4 records:

> The word of the Lord came to me: "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bore them and the fathers who fathered them in this land: They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth."

Jeremiah's call, which occurs early in his life, emphasizes God's divine initiative. The Lord knows him, forms him, consecrates him, and appoints him. The responsibility for Jeremiah's ministry rests not on the prophet himself but on God, who places His Word directly into Jeremiah's mouth.

Jeremiah's personality sets him apart. He is introspective and deeply sensitive yet driven by God's call on his life. He becomes convinced of God's inescapable will, both for his own life and for the fate of nations. Often called the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah is perhaps better described as the "misunderstood prophet." He faces rejection from family, priests, and the community alike, proclaiming God's message faithfully even as he suffers personally. Regarding Jeremiah, Farley writes:

> A more crushing burden was never laid upon a mortal man. In the whole history of the Jewish race, there has been no such example of intense sincerity, unrelieved suffering, fearless proclamation of God's message, and unwavering intercession of a prophet for his people as is found in the life of Jeremiah. But the tragedy of his life is this, that he preached to deaf ears and reaped only hate in return for his love to his fellow-countrymen. He was lightly esteemed in life, and he sank into the grave a broken-hearted

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[247] Steve Voth, "Jeremiah," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 234.

[248] 2 Sam. 23:27; 1 Kgs. 2:26.

[249] Bullock, 225; 2 Kgs. 22:8.

> man. From being of no account as a prophet, he came to be regarded as the greatest of them all.[250]

Some authors, such as Yates and Gordon, note significant parallels between the life and ministry of Jeremiah and that of Jesus. Yates is cautious when he writes, "One hesitates to speak of any human being as resembling Jesus. It will not be out of place, however, to point out certain resemblances in the environment, the methods, the outlook, and the ministry of these two individuals." He continues:

1. They lived under similar world conditions. Babylon was on the point of destroying Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, while Rome was exercising rigid control when Jesus came. In both instances, formalism had a stranglehold on religion.
2. Both Jeremiah and Jesus grew up in quiet country places where plenty of time was available for meditation.
3. Each of them came early to be rejected in the home community and by the other members of the family circle.
4. Neither of them had the joys and blessings of married life to help when priest and prophet and people opposed them.
5. Each of them was painfully conscious of God's hand upon him in the early days of his life.
6. Both understood, despised, and condemned the priests (scribes and Pharisees) as being blind leaders and false teachers.
7. Their methods of teaching were similar. The simplest child could understand and be blessed by their words.
8. Their conceptions of religion were almost identical. To them, it was a thing of the heart. Formalism was despised.
9. Their attitudes toward the Temple and ritual and the sacrificial system were so nearly the same that we marvel at the similarity.
10. Both of them gave evidence of intimate fellowship with the Father. What a rich experience each of them had.
11. They had tender, yearning hearts that spent much time in weeping over the sinning people about them.
12. In the end of life, each was considered a failure, but in later days each has taken his place among the victors. Jeremiah died in Egypt after a long life of suffering. Jesus suffered in shame and disgrace to make the sacrifice that has brought salvation to countless millions.[251]

Jeremiah has a friend and co-laborer named Baruch, son of Neriah. At times, Baruch serves as Jeremiah's scribe and, by collecting the prophet's messages, helps preserve the material that eventually forms the book of Jeremiah.[252]

As preachers learn about Jeremiah and his life, they may desire to preach from his book. However, discouragement often arises when attempting to work through the text. Jeremiah's

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[250] Yates, 134. Yates quotes from Farely but does not clearly cite the bibliographic information for Farley's work.

[251] Yates, 135–36; T. C. Gordon, *The Rebel Prophet: Studies in the Personality of Jeremiah* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 227.

[252] Jer. 36:4–21; Arnold and Beyer, 367.

work can feel unstructured and difficult to follow. Furthermore, the book is not arranged chronologically, so the timing of its events is not always clear without careful study. For these reasons and more, the organization of Jeremiah must be examined carefully if the book is to be preached coherently and faithfully.

Structural Overview

Jeremiah's book begins chronologically with the prophet's call to ministry at an early age. "The successive chapters, however, wander hither and thither over the long and rugged course of Jeremiah's active life." [253] In fairness, Jeremiah's work, like that of many other prophets, does not constitute a cohesive book in the modern sense; instead, the book functions as an anthology of oracles, narratives, and other materials. Even so, Thompson asserts that "it is possible to discover evidence of what seems to have been originally shorter 'books' with some unifying feature about them."[254] He is not alone. Other scholars, such as Bright, Bullock, and Huey Jr., also regard Jeremiah's work as consisting of smaller books or parts.[255]

These scholars generally agree on the structure of Jeremiah; however, each offers distinct nuances and unique insights. Accordingly, a brief examination of each scholar's rationale for the book's structure is warranted.

Thompson's Structure

Thompson asserts that the following three collections can be identified in Jeremiah: (1) Chapters 1–25: Divine Judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem; (2) Chapters 30–33: The Book of Consolation; and (3) Chapters 46–51: Oracles against the Nations.[256]

Thompson identifies the first collection as beginning with Jeremiah 1 and concluding with the words "everything written in this book" in Jeremiah 25:13. These chapters contain material dating primarily from 627 to 605 B.C. His reasoning comes from the text itself. Jeremiah 25:1–3 provides a starting point ("the thirteenth year of Josiah"), an endpoint ("the fourth year of Jehoiakim"), and the elapsed time ("for twenty-three years to this day").

This collection is not as straightforward as it may at first appear, "because it contains some material which was preached after 605 B.C."[257] To further complicate matters, Thompson identifies numerous pieces of evidence for even shorter books in chapters 1–25. These include oracles related to the drought (14:1–15:4), oracles "To the Royal House of Judah" (21:11–23:8), a collection addressed "To the Prophets" (23:9–40), a theme related to the "foe from the north"

[253] Wood and McLaren, 3.

[254] J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 27.

[255] John Bright, *Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), LVII–LIX; Bullock, 239; Huey Jr., 24.

[256] Thompson, 27–31.

[257] Thompson, 28. Thompson does not clearly identify what material post-dates 605 B.C.

(4:5–8, 11–13, 15–17; 5:10–17; 6:1–8; 8:16–17), and a funeral dirge (9:20–21). Furthermore, various texts within chapters 11–20 include Jeremiah's confessions, which "give a very personal insight into the inner turmoil and struggle of the prophet in the face of all the problems and dangers his ministry brought to him."[258] Apart from these, Thompson asserts that other texts found in chapters 1–25 "may once have formed small groups of passages related in date, or origin, or content, or form."[259] The result is that this first collection is "extremely complex."[260]

The second collection, the Book of Consolation in chapters 30–33, is more straightforward. Chapters 30–31 are written largely in verse and discuss the theme of restoration. Chapters 32–33 are written in prose and "may well have been linked to the other chapters because of the significance of the historical incident in which Jeremiah bought a field even as the Chaldean armies were at the gates of Jerusalem. It was his symbolic way of expressing his belief in the future restoration of Israel."[261]

The third collection begins in Jeremiah 46:1, which states, "The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations." The oracles mention Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, and Babylon. Notably, the LXX places these chapters (46–51) directly after Jeremiah 25:13a, though in a slightly different order. Thompson concludes that "such differences…suggest that these chapters had a different history of transmission in Hebrew and Greek." [262]

While the three collections cover the majority of Jeremiah's book, chapters 26–29 and 34–45, "are, for the most part, related to biographical narratives referring to incidents in the life of Jeremiah."[263] Finally, chapter 52 is a historical appendix related to 2 Kings 24:18–25:30.

Bright's Structure

Like Thompson, Bright argues that Jeremiah is best understood as a collection of shorter "books" supplemented by miscellaneous material. Accordingly, his structural outline parallels Thompson's, dividing the work into three primary units: (1) Chapters 1–25; (2) Chapters 30–33; and (3) Chapters 46–51.[264]

Bright's rationale for chapters 1–25 closely mirrors Thompson's, as both date most of the material to 627–605 B.C., based on the clear chronological framework in Jeremiah 25:1–3.

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[258] Thompson, 28.

[259] Thompson, 28–29.

[260] Thompson, 29.

[261] Thompson, 29.

[262] Thompson, 28.

[263] Thompson, 29.

[264] Bright, LVII–LXIII.

Bright is also cautious about exactly which chapters constitute The Book of Consolation. He explicitly includes chapters 30–31, while only suggesting that chapters 32–33 may also belong to the unit.[265] Both scholars likewise agree that chapters 46–51 contain oracles against foreign nations, that chapter 52 functions as an appendix, and that biographical material is interspersed throughout the book's major divisions.[266]

Bright acknowledges that identifying these smaller units does little to clarify the book's overall structure. He speaks candidly about the resulting difficulty:

> But to point out these various separate "books" does little to alleviate the reader's difficulty. For it is plain that even these are not books as we understand the term. On the contrary, each of them shares the character of the Jeremiah book as a whole: they give the impression of being loose collections without any plan of arrangement consistently carried through. [267]

Bright's honesty about Jeremiah's structure is encouraging and highlights the difficulty preachers face in presenting the book clearly and faithfully.

Bullock's Structure

Bullock begins his section on Jeremiah's structure by stating that "the identification of three separate 'books' is a rather standard procedure."[268] Unsurprisingly, then, Bullock's structure largely reflects that of Thompson's and Bright's. He calls book one, "The Basic Collection" (1:1–25:13), book two, "The Book of Consolation" (30–31), and book three, "The Oracles against the Nations" (46–51), and he also includes two biographical interludes and an appendix at the end of the entire book.[269]

Bullock's commentary on chapters 1–25, including the smaller collections found within these twenty-five chapters, is similar in a number of respects to Thompson's and Bright's. Yet Bullock offers a more robust treatment of this section than the other authors and discusses Judah's sins in detail. Bullock identifies the following sins: child sacrifice (7:30–31; 19:4–5), the worship of a plethora of false gods (11:12–13), false security that the Temple provided (7:3–10), and explicit violation of the covenant fidelity (4:22; 5:4–5; 8:7; 9:3, 6; and others).[270]

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[265] Bright, LVII.

[266] Bright offers further analysis of the compilation of Jeremiah's book, but his overall structure relates almost exactly with Thompson's.

[267] Bright, LIX–LX.

[268] Bullock, 239.

[269] Bullock, 239–47.

[270] Bullock, 240.

Bullock differs slightly from Thompson and Bright regarding The Book of Consolation. Bullock states that "the second 'book' consists only of chapters 30–31."[271] While both Thompson and Bright mention chapters 32–33 as possibly connected to The Book of Consolation; any such discussion is absent from Bullock's treatment.

Bullock's analysis of "The Oracles against the Nations" is exceedingly helpful as he offers succinct commentary on each of the oracles. Similarly, Bullock offers beneficial commentary on the two biographical subsections and the appendix.[272]

Huey Jr.'s Structure

Huey Jr.'s work on Jeremiah is generally thorough and clearly explained. However, under his section entitled "Formation and Structure of the Book," he only writes this concerning the structure: "The Book of Jeremiah appears to consist of four distinct parts: chaps. 1–25; 26–45; 46–51; and chap. 52. In addition, there is evidence of smaller collections within the work (e.g., 2:1–4:4; 4:5–6:30; 8:14–17; 21:11–23:8; 23:9–40)."[273] The rest of this section focuses on the book's formation, not on its structure.[274]

Although he offers no further commentary on the structure of Jeremiah, his brief discussion aligns with that of previous authors. The only difference is that he includes the appendix of Jeremiah 52 as a distinct subsection, rather than simply listing it alongside the three major divisions. Also, he does not explicitly list or discuss the biographical subsections that the other authors include in their commentaries.

A Structure for Preaching

When taken as a whole, these scholars present a remarkably similar structure for the Book of Jeremiah. While the three-pronged structure (four in Huey Jr.'s case) is simple enough for preachers and laypeople to comprehend, the subsections combined with the biographical interludes and appendix still result in a complex structure that is difficult to understand and even more difficult to preach.

Perhaps a more effective approach for preaching is to structure the book of Jeremiah chronologically. This method offers both distinct benefits and notable drawbacks. Among its advantages, a chronological approach helps the preacher and the congregation gain a clearer sense of the historical circumstances that shaped Jeremiah's ministry. It also allows those historical realities to be disclosed gradually, week by week, in smaller segments rather than presenting the entire historical setting at the outset of the preaching series.

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[271] Bullock, 242.

[272] Bullock, 243–47.

[273] F. B. Huey Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, The New American Commentary, vol. 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 24.

[274] Huey Jr., 24–26.

Regarding drawbacks, while certain passages can clearly and easily be dated, many other passages cannot. For this reason, only a loose chronological structure can be proposed. Furthermore, substantial work must be completed before the preacher delivers the first sermon. If the preacher begins preaching chronologically and later realizes that material has been overlooked, he may find it difficult to return and insert material after the fact.

A chronological arrangement for preaching is best achieved by connecting the content of Jeremiah's book to the relevant passages in Kings and Chronicles. All of these books cover similar information but do so in distinct ways. Kings tells the reader what happens politically and chronologically. Chronicles offers theological commentary on those events. Jeremiah provides more narrative and offers a window into what God is saying during this period.

The chronology in Kings, Chronicles, and Jeremiah can generally be structured as follows: Early Ministry under Josiah (627–609 B.C.); Conflict under Jehoahaz (609 B.C.) and Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.); Short Reign and First Deportation under Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.); Jerusalem's Collapse under Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.); and Gedaliah and the Aftermath (post-586 B.C.).

Early Ministry under Josiah (627–609 B.C.)[275]

Josiah's reign is discussed in 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35. He ascends the throne in 640 B.C., when he is only eight years old, and reigns until his death thirty-one years later. From an early age, Josiah seeks the Lord and eventually enacts religious reforms throughout Judah. Second Chronicles 34:3 explicitly states, "For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father, and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images." This means that around 633 B.C. Josiah begins seeking the Lord in earnest and, by 628 B.C. (the twelfth year of his reign), initiates his reform efforts.

The biblical narrative resumes in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, 622 B.C., when several significant events occur. Josiah authorizes repairs to the Temple, and during this work, Hilkiah discovers the Book of the Law.[276] When the book is read to the king, he repents and has it read publicly to the people. Subsequently, the covenant is renewed, further religious reforms are enacted, and the Passover is reinstated.[277]

Neither Kings nor Chronicles provides detailed accounts of events during the remainder of Josiah's reign between 622 and 609 B.C.; however, 2 Kings 23:24–25 implies that Josiah's reforms continued throughout this period. Despite Josiah's faithfulness, the biblical text is clear

[275] For clarity, Josiah's reign begins in 640 B.C., but Jeremiah's ministry does not start until 627 B.C.

[276] 2 Kgs. 22:8. The "Book of the Law" likely refers to Deuteronomy or portions of it. Within the Pentateuch, the phrase occurs only in reference to Deuteronomy (Deut. 28:61; 29:21). *ESV Study Bible*, 689.

[277] 2 Kgs. 22:11–13; 23:1–3; 2 Chr. 34:19–20; 34:29–33. Josiah's reforms are recorded in 2 Kgs. 23:4–25, and the Passover is described in 2 Chr. 35:19. The Chronicler explicitly dates the Passover to the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign.

that Judah will not be spared judgment.[278] In 609 B.C., Josiah marches out to intercept Pharaoh Necho II at Megiddo. Judah is defeated, and Josiah is killed in battle.[279]

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry begins shortly after the initial phase of Josiah's reforms. Jeremiah explicitly states that his call occurs in the "thirteenth year" of Josiah's reign (627 B.C.).[280] Thus, Jeremiah 1 takes place during Josiah's reign, following the beginning of reform but prior to the discovery of the Book of the Law. A few chapters later, Jeremiah again states that the Word of the Lord came to him in the "days of King Josiah."[281] Commenting on this verse, Huey Jr. observes, "Verse 6 contains one of the few explicit statements of a message by Jeremiah during Josiah's reign, although it is generally agreed that 2:1–6:30 came from that period."[282]

Narratively, Jeremiah 1–6 records the prophet's earliest messages. He is called and commissioned in chapter 1. Jeremiah 2–3 describes how Judah, like Israel, has abandoned their God. In chapter 4, Jeremiah pleads with the people to repent, or calamity will come from an enemy in the north. In chapter 5, the prophet laments the lack of righteous people left in Judah because the entire nation, including leaders and prophets, has succumbed to sin. Chapter 6 reiterates that disaster is coming from the enemy of the north because Judah refuses to repent.

While the dating of Jeremiah's earliest sermons (chs. 1–6) is relatively straightforward, debate exists regarding chapters 11–12. Some commentators, such as Wood and McLaren, place Jeremiah 11–12 within Josiah's reign, viewing these chapters as supportive of the reform movement.[283] Others, such as Thompson, hesitate to date these chapters at all.[284] Thompson asserts, "If there is any sort of chronological arrangement in the whole book, ch. 11 is subsequent to ch. 7, which can be dated to Jehoiakim's time (26:1), so that we may propose the reign of Jehoiakim rather than that of Josiah."[285]

Similarly, Jeremiah 18–20 is variously dated either to Josiah's reign or to the early years of Jehoiakim. Keil and Delitzsch, for example, treat Jeremiah 2–20 as a collection of discourses representing the substance of Jeremiah's preaching during Josiah's reign.[286] By contrast, the

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[278] 2 Kgs. 23:26–27. This text indicts Manasseh, not Josiah.

[279] 2 Kgs. 23:29–30; 2 Chr. 35:20–24.

[280] Jer. 1:12.

[281] Jer. 3:6.

[282] Huey Jr., 73. Earlier in the same chapter, Huey Jr. states, "The placement of these chapters [2:1–6:30] immediately after Jeremiah's call experience (1:4–19) suggests that they contain his earliest public messages." Huey Jr., 59.

[283] Wood and McLaren, 106.

[284] Thompson, 343.

[285] Thompson, 343.

[286] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Jeremiah*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint), introduction to Jeremiah 2.

editors of *The Broadman Bible Commentary* write, "Chapters 18–20 constitute an editorial unit… coming most probably from the reign of Jehoiakim."[287]

The difficulty in determining definite dates for chapters 11–12 and 18–20 is further complicated by the narrative content of these passages. Jeremiah 11 discusses how the people have broken the covenant, which does not help to narrow down a specific timeframe, as they do so time and time again. Chapter 12 is an autobiographical section focusing specifically on a complaint from Jeremiah and God's response to His prophet. Likewise, the content for chapters 18–20 lacks clear dating anchors. Chapter 18 is the famous text about the potter and the clay. In chapter 19, Jeremiah smashes a clay jar symbolizing Judah's impending destruction, and chapter 20 details the conflict between Jeremiah and Pashhur that concludes with a lament from Jeremiah. Overall, any of these events could have taken place during Josiah's or Jehoiakim's reign.

Considering the variable dating possibilities for chapters 11–12 and 18–20, a preacher must decide where the material best fits into the overall chronological preaching structure. Jeremiah 11–12 and 18–20 fit plausibly within either Josiah's or Jehoiakim's reign, and dogmatism is unwarranted. That said, thematically, the narratives of chapters 11–12 fit nicely within Josiah's reign, while the persistent rebellion of chapters 18–20 seems to align more closely with Jehoiakim.

Accordingly, a preaching recommendation is to begin a series on Jeremiah with a sermon or series of sermons examining Josiah's life in 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35. Afterwards, Jeremiah 1–6 can be preached in sequence. Chapters 11–12 can then be preached as the final sermons related to Josiah's reign, before continuing with Jehoahaz.

Conflict under Jehoahaz (609 B.C.) and Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.)

After Josiah's death, his fourth son Shallum succeeds him as king. Shallum, whose throne name is Jehoahaz, reigns for only three months before Pharaoh Necho II deposes him and exiles him to Egypt. The biblical narrative surrounding Jehoahaz's reign is found in 2 Kings 23:30–34 and 2 Chronicles 36:1–4.

Jeremiah's only clear reference to Jehoahaz appears in Jeremiah 22:10–12, where the prophet announces that Shallum "will never return. He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again."[288]

After Jehoahaz's deportation, Jehoiakim, Josiah's second son, succeeds him as king. He reigns for eleven years (609–598 B.C.), but unlike his father, Scripture records that "he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God."[289] The main narrative surrounding Jehoiakim appears in 2 Kings 23:34–24:7 and 2 Chronicles 36:4–8.

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[287] Clifton J. Allen, ed., *Jeremiah - Daniel*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 104.

[288] Jeremiah 22:11–12. In this pericope, Jeremiah also refers to Josiah, instructing the people not to mourn for him but for his son, who has gone into exile.

[289] 2 Chr. 36:5.

Jehoiakim is the first Davidic king installed on the throne by a foreign power. From the outset, therefore, he rules as a vassal of Egypt, and the early years of his reign (609–605 B.C.) are marked by heavy tribute and internal oppression. The king shows little restraint in his use of forced labor, bloodshed, and injustice in order to accomplish his goals.[290]

After the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., Jehoiakim shifts allegiance, and Judah becomes a Babylonian vassal. Several years later, in 601 B.C., Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon. Although Babylonian retaliation is not immediate, Babylon eventually invades Judah in 598 B.C., the same year Jehoiakim dies.

Numerous texts in the book of Jeremiah belong to Jehoiakim's reign. These include Jeremiah 7; 22:13–19; 25; 26; 35–36; 45; and 46. Other passages, most notably Jeremiah 8–10; 13:1–17; 14–15; 16–17; 18–20; 21:11–14; 22:1–9; 23:9–40; and 47–48; 49:1–33, may also belong to this period, though their precise placement is less certain. Even so, all of these texts can be situated with a reasonable degree of confidence within the broader chronological framework of Jehoiakim's reign.

Jeremiah 7; 26; 22:13–19; 46; 25; 36; and 35 all date to the early years of Jehoiakim's reign. Jeremiah 7 and 26 are closely connected thematically, as both center on Jeremiah's proclamation of judgment against the Temple. Their early dating is secure, since Jeremiah 26:1 explicitly states, "In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came from the Lord."

Jeremiah 22:13–19 is "probably early" in Jehoiakim's reign.[291] In this oracle, Jeremiah contrasts Jehoiakim sharply with Josiah's righteousness, condemning the king for injustice, particularly the oppressive use of forced labor in the construction of his palace. This context fits well within the period of Egyptian vassalage (609–605 B.C.), prior to Babylonian dominance.

Chronologically, Jeremiah 46 and 25 are closely connected and date precisely to 605 B.C., since both are explicitly dated to "the fourth year" of Jehoiakim's reign.[292] Chapter 46 discusses Babylon's defeat of Egypt at Carchemish, while chapter 25 interprets that event theologically and presents Nebuchadnezzar as the Lord's appointed instrument.

Jeremiah 36 also occurs during the fourth year of Jehoiakim. God tells Jeremiah to write his prophecies on a scroll so "that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin."[293] In the fifth year, the scroll is read publicly in the Temple; however, rather than repenting, Jehoiakim burns it. Jeremiah subsequently dictates a second, expanded scroll.[294]

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[290] Jer. 22:13–17.

[291] Thompson, 478.

[292] Jer. 46:2; 25:1.

[293] Jer. 36:1, 3.

[294] Jer. 36:9.

Chapter 45 is also explicitly situated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign.[295] The brief oracle addresses the personal and prophetic fallout following the king's rejection of the scroll.

Jeremiah 35 is explicitly dated to "the days of Jehoiakim," and adds a helpful chronological clue when it mentions that "Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against the land."[296] This detail situates the passage around the Battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.), which corresponds to the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign. In this chapter, Jeremiah uses the Rechabites' obedience as an object lesson to condemn Judah's persistent disobedience under Jehoiakim.[297]

The preceding texts have firm chronological indicators placing them within Jehoiakim's early reign. The following passages lack comparable chronological precision. Nevertheless, thematic and historical evidence plausibly associates them with the broader context of Jehoiakim's rule.

Jeremiah 8–10 poses a significant challenge for any chronology of the book of Jeremiah. The chapters do not include clear dating markers, nor do they offer an overarching theme. Instead, they function as a "miscellaneous collection of sermons."[298] Even so, some commentators connect these chapters to Jeremiah 7, which is firmly dated to Jehoiakim's reign. For example, Wood and McLaren assert that Jeremiah 7–10 likely dates to "the early days of Jehoiakim's reign or Josiah's last years."[299] Similarly, *The Broadman Bible Commentary* states that "in all probability" Jeremiah 8–10 should be dated to the same general timeframe as Jeremiah 7.[300]

As previously noted, some scholars date Jeremiah 18–20 to Josiah's reign, while others date the passages to the early years of Jehoiakim.[301] Thematically, the plots against Jeremiah (18:18), the Temple-centered conflict (19:14), and priestly persecution (20:1–2) fit well with Jeremiah's Temple oracles in 7 and 26.

Jeremiah 21:11–14 and 22:1–9 appear to be connected. Both texts are directed to "the house of the king of Judah," but no specific king is named. Moreover, the content of 22:1–9 continues the message of 21:11–14.[302] The editors of *The Broadman Bible Commentary* date both texts to the early years of Jehoiakim's reign.[303]

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[295] Jer. 45:1.

[296] Jer. 35:1, 11.

[297] The Rechabites are a group distantly related to the Israelites. They worship the Lord and refuse to plant vineyards, drink wine, or live in houses. *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 161.

[298] Wood and McLaren, 85.

[299] Wood and McLaren, 85. Thompson and Huey Jr. group Jeremiah 7–10 together in their outlines of the book of Jeremiah, though this does not necessarily imply a unified dating scheme. Thompson, 126; Huey Jr., 16.

[300] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 66.

[301] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 104; Thompson, 432.

[302] Thompson further subdivides Jer. 21:11–14 as follows: the duties of the king (21:11–12) and an oracle against Jerusalem (21:13–14); Thompson, 470.

[303] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 116.

Regarding Jeremiah 13, Huey Jr. asserts that "no exact date can be assigned" to these oracles.[304] Even so, he broadly dates the oracles between 605 and 597 B.C.[305] *The Broadman Bible Commentary* also asserts that the prophecies come "mainly from the reign of Jehoiakim."[306] The first seventeen verses do seem to fit best in Jehoiakim's reign. In these verses, Jeremiah uses symbolic actions such as a ruined loincloth and jars of wine to illustrate Judah's corruption and their impending judgment, before exhorting the people to humble themselves and repent. A decisive shift occurs in 13:18–19. The rest of the chapter is addressed to the king and the queen mother, who are almost certainly Jehoiachin and his mother, Nehushta.[307] Therefore, verses 18–19, along with the subsequent verses in Jeremiah 13, belong to Jehoiachin's reign.

Jeremiah 14–15 are connected by the recurring phrase "Then the Lord said to me…," and thus function as a single literary unit.[308] These chapters focus on a severe drought, the Lord's condemnation of false prophets, and sustained dialogue between Jeremiah and God. The theological posture of the material reflects something of a middle stage between the hopeful intercession characteristic of Josiah's reign and the inevitability of destruction that dominates Zedekiah's reign.

As the editors of *The Broadman Bible Commentary* suggest, "It is possible that Jeremiah uttered these words at the Temple in a time of penitence and prayer during the crisis caused by the drought."[309] Such a setting, while not explicit in the text, is compatible with the historical conditions of Jehoiakim's reign. The commentary further concludes, "The stress on the certainty of captivity points to the reign of Jehoiakim as the historical setting for the incident. Apparently, the prophet had lost hope for the preservation of the nation."[310]

In Jeremiah 16, God forbids Jeremiah from marrying or having a family because disaster is coming upon Judah. This restriction effectively rules out the final siege under Zedekiah and the postexilic period. While the narrative may be pushed back into Josiah's reign, the Lord's warnings about the impending judgment correspond best in Jehoiakim's rule.

Jeremiah 17 focuses on Judah's misplaced trust in human beings rather than in God, includes Jeremiah's personal plea for vindication, and concludes with an oracle condemning Sabbath desecration. The chapter indicates that the city gates remain open and that commerce continues. Moreover, the pleading language ("if you will listen to me") reflects a stage in Jeremiah's

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[304] Huey Jr., 143.

[305] Huey Jr., 143.

[306] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 84.

[307] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 88.

[308] Jer. 15:1.

[309] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 89.

[310] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 89.

ministry in which judgment is urgent but not yet historically realized.[311] For these reasons, "the reign of Jehoiakim provides the most likely historical setting."[312]

The beginning of Jeremiah 23, verses 1–8, likely dates to Zedekiah's reign; however, the rest of the chapter fits with Jeremiah's Temple oracles delivered during Jehoiakim's period. While Jeremiah 23:9–40 lacks clear dates, the passage's language echoes that of chapters 7 and 26. All of these passages discuss corrupt priests and prophets and warn of coming disaster. For these reasons, preaching Jeremiah 23:9–40 directly after Jeremiah 7 and 26 makes homiletical sense.

Jeremiah 47–48 and 49:1–33 belong to the Oracles of the Nations in chapters 46–51. Chapter 47 contains an oracle against Philistia that comes "before Pharaoh defeated Gaza."[313] However, these details do not help precisely date the text because the exact Pharaoh and the date of the defeat of Gaza are unknown. What this text does indicate is that Egypt had not yet withdrawn from the region. Thompson comments, "Jeremiah's prophecy could well have been given after the Battle of Carchemish, when the prophet became convinced that the Babylonians would move on to conquer both Judah and the surrounding nations."[314] If Thompson is correct, the oracle is best dated to Jehoiakim's reign.

Chapter 48 contains extensive oracles against Moab. In fact, "Except for Babylonia, Moab received more attention from Jeremiah than any other nation, including Egypt."[315] Commenting on the length of the oracles, Wood and McLaren observe, "This disproportionate amount of attention to Moab indicates this opposition to Israel as more intense than most scholars have thought."[316] Despite the prominence and length of the material, the historical setting of the oracles remains ambiguous. *The Broadman Bible Commentary* describes the problem as follows:

> The exact setting of the present prophecy is difficult to determine because of the lack of internal evidence and because of the inadequacy of our knowledge of Moabite history. If our assumption that Jeremiah's grasp of the political and religious significance of the victory of the Babylonians at Carchemish is the primary explanation of his preoccupation with the future of surrounding nations is true, then the oracle against Moab dates from the period shortly after that victory and deals with Moab in the light of the significance of Nebuchadnezzar's triumph for her.[317]

If this assessment is correct, the oracle against Moab likely dates to the period following the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. and thus belongs within Jehoiakim's early reign.

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[311] Jer. 17:24.

[312] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 98.

[313] Jer. 47:1.

[314] Thompson, 696.

[315] Huey Jr., 387.

[316] Wood and McLaren, 335.

[317] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 188.

Jeremiah 49:1–33 contains oracles against Ammon (49:1–6), Edom (49:7–22), Damascus (49:23–27), and Kedar and Hazor (49:28–33).[318] This passage is exceedingly difficult to date, and these oracles may not belong to Jehoiakim's reign. The decision to place this material here is based on textual and homiletical considerations. Textually, the oracles provide indirect chronological evidence. Jeremiah 49:28 mentions Nebuchadnezzar and seems best situated around 605 B.C. Additionally, many of these same nations are mentioned in Jeremiah 25:15–26, which is dated to Jehoiakim's reign. Furthermore, these nations are Judah's immediate geographical neighbors. This suggests a time when Judah is politically active and the surrounding nations are being destabilized, which also fits Jehoiakim's reign. Homiletically, preaching 49:1–33 after the oracles against Philistia and Moab (Jeremiah 47–48) keeps the theme of God's sovereignty over nations outside of Judah together.

Having examined the texts in Jeremiah that pertain to the reigns of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, attention must now turn to how these materials may best be preached systematically. A logical sequence is to follow the final sermon from Josiah's reign (Jeremiah 12) with a sermon on Jehoahaz, drawing on 2 Kings 23:30–34, 2 Chronicles 36:1–4, and Jeremiah 22:10–12.

Once Jehoahaz's brief reign has been addressed, a sermon or series of sermons could then focus on Jehoiakim's life and rule as presented in 2 Kings 23:34–24:7 and 2 Chronicles 36:4–8. From there, the Jeremiah passages that relate to Jehoiakim can be subdivided into three chronological units.

The first unit begins with Jeremiah's Temple Sermons as recorded in chapters 7 and 26. Then chapters 23:9–40; 18–20; 8–10 can be preached as they generally relate to the timeframe and themes of the Temple Sermons.

The second unit focuses on oracles that date to around the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign. The oracles that solidly date to this period (22:13–19; 46; 25; 36; and 35) offer a helpful historical and theological window into what is happening early in Jehoiakim's reign. Likewise, as previously discussed, Jeremiah 21:11–14 and 22:1–9 likely date to this general period. The contents of chapters 47 and 48 also date to this timeframe, but because they focus on other nations, they should, along with 49:1–33, be preached as the final sermons of this second unit.

The third unit includes messages that date later in Jehoiakim's reign, though they lack a clear chronological structure. These passages include Jeremiah 13:1–17 and chapters 14–17. Because of the ambiguity of dating, these passages need not be preached in sequence, though they can be. These sermons finish the oracles related to Jehoiakim; the following sermons will focus on Jehoiachin's reign.

Short Reign and First Deportation under Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.)

Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin becomes the next king of Judah.[319] His brief rule is described in 2 Kings 24:6–17; 25:27–30; and 2 Chronicles 36:9–10. His reign is remarkably similar to

[318] For a concise overview of these nations, see Wood and McLaren, 338–340.

[319] A textual issue exists regarding Jehoiachin's age at accession. Most Hebrew manuscripts of 2 Chr. 36:9 state that he was eight years old when he became king, whereas 2 Kgs. 24:8 records his age as eighteen. The Septuagint follows the reading in Kings. The discrepancy is commonly attributed to scribal omission. Biblical Hebrew

Jehoahaz's, as both rule for only about three months before being deposed and taken into exile by a foreign power.[320] Jehoiachin is among the first group of Judean exiles deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II. The exiled king remains imprisoned until after Nebuchadnezzar's death, when Evil-Merodach releases Jehoiachin and provides for his needs. However, he is never permitted to return to Judah.[321]

Jeremiah 22:24–30 is the central text relating to Jehoiachin in Jeremiah's book. In this oracle, God declares that Jehoiachin will be removed from the throne, exiled to Babylon for the remainder of his life, and that none of his descendants will rule Judah. Although the message of the oracle is exceedingly clear, confusion can arise because some Bible translations use the name Coniah rather than Jehoiachin.[322] The matter is easily resolved, however, since Coniah is simply a shortened form of Jehoiachin.[323]

Jeremiah 13:18–27 does not explicitly name Jehoiachin; rather, the text reads, "Say to the king and the queen mother." Nevertheless, the passage almost certainly relates to Jehoiachin's reign because of the explicit inclusion of his mother in the oracle.[324] *The Broadman Bible Commentary* explains the passage as follows:

> This brief, deeply moving poetic prophecy is addressed to Jehoiachin and his mother, Nehushta. The occasion is the captivity of 597. Jeremiah tells the young king and the queen-mother that they must accept their fate with humility and grace. There is no possibility of help from the Egyptians to the south. The exile is a reality.[325]

Jeremiah 24 and 29 relate to events immediately following the deportation of 597 B.C. Because both passages interpret Jehoiachin's exile and address those taken with him, they may reasonably be included here. Alternatively, these texts could be treated later, at the beginning of Zedekiah's reign. The difference between these approaches is not one of chronology, but of homiletical focus.

In Jeremiah 24, the prophet interprets the deportation of 597 B.C. theologically, portraying the exiles as "good figs" and those who remain in Judah as "bad figs." The oracle addresses a serious theological problem that emerges among those left behind after the exile. As Thompson notes,

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expresses the numbers eleven through nineteen as "unit + ten"; thus, "eighteen" consists of the words "eight" and "ten." The omission of עשר ("ten") would yield "eight." Many English translations note this issue. For example, the ESV footnote on 2 Chr. 36:9 reads, "Septuagint (compare 2 Kings 24:8); most Hebrew manuscripts eight." The reading "eighteen" is further supported by 2 Kgs. 24:15, which indicates that Jehoiachin had wives when he became king.

[320] Jehoiachin reigns exactly "three months and ten days" (2 Chr. 36:9).

[321] Evil-Merodach becomes the next Babylonian king after his father Nebuchadnezzar's death (2 Kgs. 25:27–30).

[322] Jer. 22:28. Formal-equivalence translations such as the KJV, ESV, and NASB use "Coniah," whereas functional translations such as the NIV and NLT use "Jehoiachin."

[323] Huey Jr., 209.

[324] His mother likely played a part in his brief reign as she is mentioned by name in 2 Kgs. 24:8.

[325] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 88.

"Those who remained seem to have been full of optimism for the future."[326] The Lord counters this optimism by declaring that no swift return from Babylon will occur and that, contrary to popular expectation, the exiles are in a more favorable position than those who remain in the land.

Chapter 29 consists primarily of correspondence between Jeremiah and the Judean exiles in Babylon. In 29:1–23, Jeremiah sends a letter to the exiles directly countering the claims of false prophets who predict a swift return to Judah. Jeremiah declares that the Lord has not sent these prophets and that the exile will not be brief. The optimism fostered by the false prophets is therefore unfounded.[327]

In 29:24–28, Jeremiah responds to a letter sent from Babylon by the false prophet Shemaiah, who urges Zephaniah the priest to silence Jeremiah. Instead of suppressing Jeremiah's message, Zephaniah reads Shemaiah's letter aloud to Jeremiah.[328] The chapter concludes with a brief letter from Jeremiah announcing divine judgment against Shemaiah for his rebellion.

Jeremiah 22:20–23 is not explicitly connected to a specific ruler and may be interpreted as addressed to "all the people, rather than to the kings."[329] However, the editors of *The Broadman Bible Commentary* assert that the placement of this oracle is significant for determining its date. They write:

> This is a poignant lament over Jerusalem, a deeply loved but disobedient city. The date is about 598, close to the time of the capture of the city and the first Babylonian captivity. Since Jehoiakim died prior to the siege and since his son Jehoiachin succeeded to the throne for a short time before deportation to Babylon, the passage is appropriately placed—after the invective against Jehoiakim and before the oracles concerning Jehoiachin.[330]

In light of this analysis, Jeremiah 22:20–23 may be preached together with verses 24–30 as material related to Jehoiachin's reign.

The Jeremiah texts related to Jehoiachin may be preached either in a single sermon or in a brief series. A single-sermon approach could draw primarily from the relevant passages in Kings and Chronicles, with the Jeremiah texts serving as theological and prophetic support. If a series is preferred, a sermon based on the Kings and Chronicles narratives could serve as the foundational message, followed by sermons drawn from the other Jeremiah passages in approximate chronological sequence. However, given the natural cohesion between Jeremiah 22:20–23, 24–30, and 13:18–19, and between Jeremiah 24 and 29, a two-sermon structure may offer the most effective balance.

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[326] Thompson, 507.

[327] Huey Jr., 256–57.

[328] Jer. 29:29.

[329] Huey Jr., 208.

[330] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 119.

Jerusalem's Collapse under Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.)

After Jehoiachin is exiled to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II appoints Zedekiah (r. 597–586 B.C.) as the next puppet king of Judah. His reign is detailed in 2 Kings 24:17–20; 25:1–7; and 2 Chronicles 36:11–21.[331] In 588 B.C., nine years into his reign, Zedekiah rebels against Babylon and seeks to ally with Egypt. In response, Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem, and for nearly two years, the city remains under relentless assault. On the ninth day of the fourth month in 586 B.C., the Babylonian army breaches the walls of Jerusalem. Within a month, Babylon gains total control of the city. Zedekiah attempts to flee when the breach occurs, but is soon captured. His sons are killed in front of him, his eyes are gouged out, and he is taken to Babylon.[332] Numerous passages in Jeremiah explicitly relate to Zedekiah's reign, including Jeremiah 21:1–10; 27–28; 32–34; 37–39; 49:34–39; and 52:1–11. Additionally, the following texts may date to Zedekiah's reign, though they lack explicit dating anchors: Jeremiah 23:1–8; 30–31; and 50–51.

Chronologically, Jeremiah 49:34–39 is the earliest passage related to Zedekiah's reign, as the text is clearly dated to the "beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah."[333] This passage contains an oracle against Elam. Under Ashurbanipal, Elam comes under Assyrian control until Cyaxares and Nabopolassar destroy Nineveh in 612 B.C. Some scholars date Elam's independence to 612 B.C.; however, some evidence dates Elam's freedom as early as 626 B.C. According to Thompson, "A broken text in the Babylonian Chronicle may indicate a clash between Nebuchadnezzar and Elam in 596/4 B.C. to prevent an Elamite advance into Babylonia. If the interpretation of the fragmentary text is correct, Jeremiah's date of 597 B.C. (the ascension year of Zedekiah) would predate this event."[334] Either way, this passage discusses God's judgment on Elam and His eventual restoration of the nation. In 539 B.C., the Persian conquest brings Elam under Persian control, and Susa "becomes the center of the Persian Empire."[335]

Jeremiah 27–28 form a single literary unit. Jeremiah 27:1 places the passage "in the beginning of Zedekiah's reign," and 28:1 places the text "in that same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah."[336] The backdrop for these chapters is a meeting in Jerusalem involving diplomats from neighboring nations around 594 B.C.[337] These diplomats hope to "either

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[331] 2 Kgs. 25:8–21 discusses the aftermath of Zedekiah's reign, including the destruction of the Temple.

[332] 2 Kgs. 25:6–7.

[333] Jer. 49:34.

[334] Thompson, 728.

[335] Huey Jr., 407.

[336] The Masoretic Text reads "Jehoiakim" instead of Zedekiah in Jeremiah 27:1. As Wood and McLaren observe, "scholars are in virtual agreement it should read as the NIV and HCSB do. Some students suggest 27:1 is a recopying of 26:1, a logical suggestion… Chapter 27 presupposes the exile of 597 B.C. Furthermore, the remainder of this chapter uses 'Zedekiah.'" Wood and McLaren, 238.

[337] According to Jer. 27:3, diplomats come from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon.

persuade Zedekiah to join a revolt or to plan the strategy for a rebellion already decided upon."[338]

In chapter 27, God commands Jeremiah to put on a yoke to symbolize submission to Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah pleads with Zedekiah, imploring, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people and live. Why will you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?"[339] The false prophet Hananiah refutes Jeremiah by claiming that God has "broken the yoke of the king of Babylon," and that the exile will be brief. Jeremiah rebuts Hananiah, telling him that he will die for his false prophecy.[340] Jeremiah 28:17 vindicates Jeremiah as the Lord's prophet, stating, "In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died." Zedekiah does not immediately side with the anti-Babylonian coalition, nor does he humble himself and submit to God's Word concerning Babylon.

Jeremiah 21:1–10; 32–34; and 37–39 all date to Judah's final years before the fall (c. 588–586 B.C.). Jeremiah 21:1–10 is the earliest of these passages, occurring during the early phase of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, prior to the city's fall. Zedekiah sends Pashur and Zephaniah to Jeremiah to "inquire of the Lord for us, for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is making war against us. Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all his wonderful deeds and will make him withdraw from us."[341] However, Jeremiah's response makes clear that "Judah's fate was sealed. God was determined…to destroy Jerusalem."[342]

Chronologically, Jeremiah 32–34 take place after Jeremiah 21:1–10, with Jeremiah 34 likely occurring mid-siege, before 32–33.[343] Chapter 32 gives explicit dating anchors, "the tenth year" of Zedekiah's reign and the "eighteenth year" of Nebuchadnezzar's reign,[344] and chapter 33 dates to the same period.[345] These details place chapters 32–33 in the late stage of the siege. Jeremiah 37–39 occur only slightly later, during the final months of the siege, and record the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Narratively, chapter 34 focuses on Jeremiah's word to Zedekiah concerning Jerusalem's certain destruction. Even so, God will allow Zedekiah to eventually die in peace while exiled in

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[338] *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 136.

[339] Jer. 27:12–13.

[340] Jer. 28:16.

[341] Jer. 21:2.

[342] Huey Jr., 201.

[343] Jer. 34:7 states that Lachish and Azekah are the only fortified cities of Judah that remain, implying that the rest of the surrounding countryside is lost.

[344] Jer. 32:1.

[345] Jer. 33:1.

Babylon, not by the sword. The remainder of chapter 34 focuses on the release and subsequent re-enslavement of Hebrew slaves during the siege.

By contrast, the setting of chapters 32–33 is described in detail and takes place while Jeremiah is confined in the "court of the guard," meaning he is not free but also not in isolation. In fact, he can buy a field in hopeful expectation of God's future grace, even while he is confined. Jeremiah's hopeful theme continues in chapter 33, where he discusses God's ultimate plan to restore and forgive His people.

In chapters 37–39, Jeremiah's circumstances change repeatedly. Jeremiah 37:4 indicates that for a time, he is no longer confined to the court of the guard. However, in 37:15, Jeremiah is accused of desertion and is arrested. This time, the prophet is harshly treated and confined to a dungeon-like cell in Jonathan's house.[346] Subsequently, in Jeremiah 37:21, Zedekiah again places Jeremiah in the court of the guard. The prophet remains there until he is accused of undermining the nation's morale and is thrown into a muddy cistern, where he likely would have died if not for the intervention of the Ethiopian official who rescues him. Afterward, Jeremiah is once again returned to the court of the guard, where he remains until Jerusalem falls. Babylonian officials then remove him and place him under Gedaliah's supervision, allowing the prophet to live among the surviving population.

Chapter 52 is not prophetic material but a historical appendix.[347] Jeremiah 52:1–11 explicitly focuses on Zedekiah, but the remainder of the chapter recounts the destruction of the Temple, preserves deportation data, and concludes with the release of Jehoiachin. The primary homiletical issue is whether to preach the opening of Jeremiah 52 alongside the other passages that discuss Zedekiah, or to reserve the entire chapter for the final sermon of the series.

Jeremiah 23:1–8 likely continues the critique of Judah's kings found in Jeremiah 22. According to Wood and McLaren, "This smaller section is about Zedekiah, though Jeremiah refrained from using his name. Perhaps the prophet avoided it out of respect for the king because the siege of Babylon was probably already underway."[348] Accordingly, Jeremiah 23:1–8 may be preached directly before 21:1–10.

The Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30–31) is not clearly connected to Zedekiah's reign; however, as previously discussed, scholars such as Thompson and Bright support a tentative link between chapters 30–33. For example, Thompson states that chapters 30–31 "may well have been linked to the other chapters because of the significance of the historical incident in which Jeremiah bought a field even as the Chaldean armies were at the gates of Jerusalem. It was his symbolic way of expressing his belief in the future restoration of Israel."[349] Therefore, an

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[346] Jer. 37:11–16.

[347] According to *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, the "chapter consists of an excerpt from 2 Kings 24:18–25:30, with minor variations, one major omission (2 Kings 25:22–26), and one significant addition (vv. 28–30). The addition is quite important because it contains material from an unknown sources and not found elsewhere in the Bible (either MT or LXX)." *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 201.

[348] Wood and McLaren, 214.

[349] Thompson, 29.

argument for a thematic connection is reasonable in these chapters. Because of the theme of consolation that runs through the chapters, preachers may decide to include The Book of Consolation with their sermons based on 32–34.[350]

The oracles against Babylon found in Jeremiah 50–51 fit well homiletically with this overall section. Jeremiah 51:59 explicitly mentions the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign, though the verse does not help date the larger material from chapters 50–51. Broadly, the Babylonian oracles predate 539 B.C. since Babylon's conqueror, Persia, is not mentioned. Outside of that general timeframe, no explicit date can be given.

According to Huey Jr., "the judgment messages against Babylon are the longest of all the judgment messages in chaps. 46–51 (a total of 110 verses). They are almost as long as all the messages together in chaps. 46–49 (121 verses)."[351] While the content of these oracles does not securely date to Zedekiah's reign, their content thematically fits with Jeremiah 27–28. In chapters 27–28, Jeremiah calls for submission to Babylon. The central theme of chapters 50–51 is the overthrow of Babylon and the restoration of the Jews to their homeland."[352] Therefore, preaching Jeremiah 50–51 directly after chapters 27–28 fits the Babylonian connection and honors God's ultimate plan for Babylon and His people.

Regarding a homiletical structure, a logical approach is to begin with a sermon on 2 Kings 24:17–20; 25:1–7; and 2 Chronicles 36:11–21, to give an overview of Zedekiah and his reign. The Jeremiah material related to Zedekiah can be subdivided into early and late oracles. The early oracles include Jeremiah 49:34–39, 27–28, and 50–51. The primary homiletical challenge is how and when to preach the oracles against Elam (49:34–39) and Babylon (50–51). If a preacher wants to stick to a chronological approach, then the Elam oracle should be preached first. Still, care must be taken to properly introduce who the Elamites were and why the oracle exists at all. This oracle, along with the other oracles against the nations, shows that God is just and that He truly is Lord over all peoples and nations. The oracle is brief enough that an entire sermon does not necessarily have to be preached on it. The oracle could serve to support the sovereignty of God displayed in the Babylonian oracles.

Chapters 27–28 call for submission to Babylon, while chapters 50–51 confirm that Babylon will not have the final word for God's people. The Babylonians are God's instrument to judge His people, but they, too, will be judged by God. For this reason, inserting Jeremiah 50–51 (and possibly 49:34–39) after chapters 27–28 seems the best place for the Babylonian oracles.

The late oracles begin with Jeremiah 23:1–8 and 21:1–10, which likely occur during the early phase of the Babylonian siege. The other passages from this period, Jeremiah 32–34 and 37–39, can be preached sequentially. A homiletical issue is where to preach The Book of Consolation. A reasonable schema is to preach The Book of Consolation before preaching 32–34. This approach highlights the hope that these passages convey, even in the midst of Judah's imminent downfall.

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[350] Jer. 34 is not thematically connected to chapters 30–33 but Jer. 34 is chronologically connected.

[351] Huey Jr., 407.

[352] Thompson, 731.

That said, a preacher can also reasonably wait to preach The Book of Consolation after Jerusalem's fall in chapter 37.

Another homiletical issue is when to preach the appendix. Chapter 52 can be split so that the texts dealing with Zedekiah and the Temple are preached in this section, and the rest of the chapter is preached at the end of the sermon series. However, another approach is to wait and preach the entire appendix at the end of the series. The main reason to wait to preach the appendix is that the chapter offers a fitting and coherent ending to the book of Jeremiah.

Gedaliah and the Aftermath (Post-586 B.C.)

After Zedekiah's exile to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar appoints Gedaliah as governor.[353] Gedaliah rules from Mizpah, likely because the devastation of Jerusalem made it impractical to govern from the city.[354] However, only a few months later, "Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishama, of the royal family, came with ten men and struck down Gedaliah and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah."[355] Second Kings 25:22–26 discusses events related to Gedaliah's governorship and subsequent assassination. Second Chronicles 36:20–21 also briefly mentions events related to the exile.

After Gedaliah is assassinated, his friend Johanan attempts to avenge Gedaliah's death, but Ishmael escapes. At this point, Jeremiah tells Johanan to remain in Judah, but Johanan refuses to listen and forcibly takes Jeremiah and others to Egypt. The flight to Egypt is recounted in 2 Kings 25:26.

Jeremiah 40–41 focus on Gedaliah's narrative. Jeremiah's account offers significantly more detail than the parallel account in 2 Kings 25:22–25. An important thematic element in Jeremiah 40–41is the remnant. Jeremiah 40:12 states, "Then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been driven and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah at Mizpah." Some of these people are taken by Ishmael when Gedaliah is assassinated. Yet Jeremiah confirms that the remnant is safely returned when he writes, "So all the people whom Ishmael had carried away captive from Mizpah turned around and came back and went to Johanan the son of Kareah."[356]

Chapters 42–43 narrate the events surrounding Johanan and the flight to Egypt. Chapter 42 begins with Johanan and the remnant asking Jeremiah to intercede on their behalf about whether they should flee to Egypt or remain in Judah. Ten days later, Jeremiah receives God's Word in which He commands the people to remain in Judah. However, chapter 43 details the people's rebellion and the migration to Egypt.

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[353] According to Jer. 39:11–14, Nebuchadnezzar deals kindly with Jeremiah and places him under Gedaliah's care.

[354] 2 Kgs. 25:23.

[355] 2 Kgs. 25:25.

[356] Jer. 41:14.

Jeremiah 44 includes the only detailed account in Scripture of the Judean community's time in Egypt. This chapter also includes Jeremiah's final recorded oracle, given to the people during their time in Egypt.

The appendix of Jeremiah 52 offers an overview of Judah's final days and Jehoiachin's eventual release. Furthermore, the appendix includes details about the number of exiles, which is found nowhere else in Scripture.

Regarding the chronological structure for preaching, this unit is straightforward. Unlike other sections, a separate sermon from Kings/ Chronicles is not advised here because the same material is covered extensively in the corresponding Jeremiah texts. Accordingly, Jeremiah 40–44 can be preached in sequence. Jeremiah 52 serves as a fitting final sermon for this section, and for the entire book of Jeremiah.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to help preachers faithfully preach from the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah and the other Old Testament prophets can be difficult to preach from because of their historical context, which is largely unknown today. The paper began by examining the four major empires of the Old Testament period. This examination helped frame the broader context for the prophets in general and for Jeremiah in particular.

The second section of the paper surveyed biblical prophecy and explored the individual ministries of the classical prophets. This overview helped place Jeremiah in his prophetic, biblical, and historical context.

Outside of a brief biographical introduction to Jeremiah, the paper's third section focused on providing a chronological structure for preaching through the book. That focus is admittedly narrow. The book's structure is only one piece of a much larger puzzle. For example, issues such as the differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of Jeremiah, the book's composition, and its unique literary features are all important background considerations. The lack of serious consideration of these and similar issues in this work does not mean they are unimportant. Rather, information on these sorts of background issues is relatively easy to find. Most commentaries, study Bibles, and numerous journal articles discuss the issues in detail. On the other hand, a chronological preaching structure for Jeremiah is harder to come by. The information is out there, and most preachers have the training and resources to research it. The overarching problem is time (or the lack thereof). Thus, the focus of section 3 was so limited.

I pray that this study of Jeremiah has encouraged you to keep running the race God has called you to run. Like Jeremiah, preachers can often feel misunderstood and mistreated. We must remember that this calling on our lives is not a punishment but a gift from a Father who truly loves us, loves His church, and loves this world. Don't give up. Continue to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2).

Appendix 1

Chronological Dating Information for the Old Testament Prophets

Prophet	Approx. Dates	Primary Location	Reigns
Jonah	c. 780–760 B.C.	Israel / Nineveh	Jeroboam II
Amos	c. 760–750 B.C.	Israel (from Judah)	Jeroboam II
Hosea	c. 755–715 B.C.	Israel	Jeroboam II → fall of Samaria
Isaiah	c. 740–700 B.C.	Judah	Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah
Micah	c. 738–698 B.C.	Judah	Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah
Nahum	c. 650–620 B.C.	Judah	Manasseh / early Josiah
Zephaniah	c. 630–625 B.C.	Judah	Early Josiah
Habakkuk	c. 640–630 B.C. *(Bullock)*	Judah	Manasseh / early Josiah
	c. 605–597 B.C. *(Chalmers)*	Judah	Jehoiakim
Jeremiah	c. 627–582 B.C.	Judah / Egypt	Josiah → Zedekiah
Daniel	c. 605–536 B.C.	Babylon / Persia	Nebuchadnezzar → Cyrus
Ezekiel	c. 593–571 B.C.	Babylon (Chebar)	Jehoiachin (exilic)
Obadiah	c. 586–553 B.C.	Judah / Edom	Post-586 exile
Haggai	520 B.C.	Judah (Jerusalem)	Darius I
Zechariah	520–518 B.C.	Judah	Darius I
Malachi	c. 460–430 B.C.	Judah	Artaxerxes I
Joel	c. 900–400 B.C.	Judah	Unknown

Appendix 2

Chronological Placement of Jeremiah's Prophecies by Monarch

Josiah's Reign (627–609 B.C.)	
Jeremiah Texts Securely Dated to Josiah	Jeremiah Texts Tentatively Dated to Josiah
1–6	11–12 18–20
Jehoahaz's Reign (609 B.C.)	
Jeremiah Texts Securely Dated to Jehoahaz	Jeremiah Texts Tentatively Dated to Jehoahaz
22:10–12	n/a
Jehoiakim's Reign (609–598 B.C.)	
Jeremiah Texts Securely Dated to Jehoiakim	Jeremiah Texts Tentatively Dated to Jehoiakim
7, 26 22:13–19 46, 25 36 45 35	18–20 8–10 13:1–17, 20–27 21:11–14; 22:1–9 14–15 16–17 23:9–40 47–48 49:1–33
Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.)	
Jeremiah Texts Securely Dated to Jehoiachin	Jeremiah Texts Tentatively Dated to Jehoiachin
22:24–30 13:18–27	22:20–23 24 29
Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.)	
Jeremiah Texts Securely Dated to Zedekiah	Jeremiah Texts Tentatively Dated to Zedekiah
49:34–39 27–28 21:1-10 32–34 37–39 52:1–22	23:1–8 30–31 50–51

Gedaliah and the Aftermath (Post-586 B.C.)	
Jeremiah Texts Securely Dated Post-586 B.C.	Jeremiah Texts Tentatively Dated Post-586 B.C.
40–41 42–43 44 52:24–34	n/a

Appendix 3

A Chronological Outline for Preaching Jeremiah

I. Early Ministry under Josiah (627–609 B.C.)
   a. Connection to the Historical Books
      i. 2 Kgs. 22–23
      ii. 2 Chr. 34–35
   b. Passages in Jeremiah
      i. 1–6
      ii. 11–12

II. Conflict under Jehoahaz (609 B.C.) and Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.)
   a. Connection to the Historical Books
      i. Jehoahaz (2 Kgs. 23:30–34; 2 Chr. 36:1–4)
      ii. Jehoiakim (2 Kgs. 23:34–24:7; 2 Chr. 36:4–8)
   b. Passages in Jeremiah
      i. Jehoahaz
         1. 22:10–12
      ii. Jehoiakim
         1. 7; 26
         2. 23:9–40
         3. 22:13–19
         4. 46; 25
         5. 36
         6. 45
         7. 35
         8. 8–10
         9. 13:1–17, 20–27
         10. 14–15
         11. 16–17
         12. 18–20
         13. 21:11–14; 22:1–9
         14. 47–48
         15. 49:1–33

III. Short Reign and First Deportation under Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.)
   a. Connection to the Historical Books
      i. 2 Kgs. 24:6–17; 25:27–30
      ii. 2 Chr. 36:9–10
   b. Passages in Jeremiah
      i. 22:20–23, 24–30; 13:18–27
      ii. 24; 29

IV. Jerusalem's Collapse under Zedekiah (597–586 B.C.)
   a. Connection to the Historical Books
      i. 2 Kgs. 24:17–20; 25:1–7
      ii. 2 Chr. 36:11–21
   b. Passages in Jeremiah
      i. 49:34–39

ii. 27–28
iii. 50–51
iv. 23:1–8
v. 21:1–10
vi. 30–31
vii. 32–34
viii. 37–39

V. Gedaliah and the Aftermath (Post-586 B.C.)
a. Connection to the Historical Books
i. 2 Kgs. 25:22–26
ii. 2 Chr. 36:20–21
b. Passages in Jeremiah
i. 40–41
ii. 42–43
iii. 44
iv. 52

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